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PERIODS ARE DIRTY FLOW: INTERSECTION OF CULTURE, CASTE AND GENDER IN PERSONAL NARRATIVES ON MENSTRUATION

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Abstract: Menstruation is a universal biological process and is happening in almost all female body. Society plays a great role in treating menstruators as the 'others', bringing them to the peripheral level in the name of culture, caste and gender. Male Power is constructed in the patriarchal society by attributing low cultural status to a menstruating woman. Women during their periods are going through various physical, psychological and health issues which are less discussed in literature. Still, women hesitate to speak in public on menstruation and related issues. *The Palgrave Book of Critical Menstruation Studies* edited by Chris Bob et.al. discusses various aspects of menstruation through the write ups by various personalities and it includes personal narratives, general aspects and activists' write ups. This paper aims at identifying how culture, caste and gender intersect in the personal narratives on menstruation in order to attribute a secondary status to menstruating women.

Index Terms - Menstruation, Stigma, gender, caste, culture, personal narratives.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies edited by Chris Bobis et.al. is an open access book which deals with various aspects of menstruation, viewing menstruation from social, cultural, psychological and political levels. This ground breaking book on menstruation is divided into five parts, each part views menstruation from different aspects which offers the readers a space to understand various types of menstruators and analysing menstruation from multiple perspectives. The first part is titled as Menstruation as Fundamental which consists of fourteen chapters which deal with the experience of menstruation of different categories including those from Delhi's slums, the homelessness, prisoners, trans people etc. Part two is titled as Menstruation as Embodied. This part consists of eleven chapters which discuss various cultural aspects related to menstruation. Third part, Menstruation as Rationale consists of nine chapters which discuss various concepts such as menstrunormativity, menstrual positivity, menarche rituals and transnational engagement. Fourth part entitled menstruation as structural consists of thirteen chapters on menstrual poverty, menstrual health, menstrual hygiene management and menstrual activism as main themes. Fifth part menstruation as material views menstruation in a material context in the thirteen chapters included in this part. Last part, menstruation as narrative consists of eleven chapters which break the taboos and stigma surrounding menstruation.

This book includes four personal narratives entitled *Personal Narrative: Let Girls Be Girls- My Journey into Forced Womanhood* by Musu Bakoto sawo, *Personal Narrative: Out of the Mikvah, into the world* by Tova Mirvis, *personal Narrative: caste is my period* by Deepthi Sukumar, and *Bloody precarious Activism in Uganda* by Stella Nyanzi. These four personal narratives discuss the role of society and culture in constructing menstruators as the marginalized, talking of period shame, constructing gender by strictly adhering to the menstrual rituals practicing in their culture and the need for menstrual hygiene and menstrual health. Menstruation symbolizes our general concept of femininity, but more specifically the notion of feminine inferiority (Macdonald, 2007). The menstrual practices performed in the cultures of these narrators strengthen the above statement.

In *Let Girls Be Girls*, the writer speaks about the role of menarche in constructing gender in Gambian society in Africa. Menstruation, for them, is an announcement that their body is ready to conceive; "once a girl reaches menarche, in many communities, especially mine, she is considered fit for marriage" (Sawo, 2020, p. 94). Sawo (2020) says that "child brides are forced to abandon school and focus on building families with their husbands, who are complete strangers to them" (p.93). Sawo knows that menstruation is normal, but she hides her menarche from her mother because of the fear of getting married for she doesn't want to discontinue her education. Sawo (2020) says: "menstruation in Gambian society symbolizes maturity, womanhood and the capacity to conceive; it basically translates to the readiness of a girl to engage in sexual activities" (p.94). Also, there is the fear that once a girl has her menarche, she should be married off in order to get rid of the shame of becoming pregnant before

marriage. Menarche is actually ascribing a new gender role to the girl, but it is through constructing gender in the form of oppression. In the Gambian society, the girl is taught of the duties and responsibilities she has to perform to her husband and dropouts in the schools are very common. Denying education and accepting the new status as a wife is a way of oppression which show that she is inferior to her husband. Sawo understands the role of education in empowering women and she hopes “for a future where all girls are protected from the harms of child marriage and are able to fulfill their potentials and realize their dreams” (Sawo, 2020, p.96).

In out of the Mikvah, into the world, the writer Tova Mirvis speaks about a ritual bath, a ritual immersion in Judaism to achieve ritual purity. Mikvah is a pond where Jewish women have to get immersed before marriage and when observing the laws of menstrual purity. In the Jewish culture, women have to follow the rules of Jewish family purity. Seven days of the periods are the days of impurity and after that women have to be sure that they are not bleeding and after that they have to perform the ritual bath to make themselves pure in order to have sexual contact with their husbands. Mirvis (2020) says:

When we had our periods and for eleven days following, we were in a state of impurity: we couldn't touch our husbands- no sex, not a hug, not a handshake. Once our periods had ceased, we were to check ourselves to be clean, we were to leave the cloth inside us for thirty minutes, just to be sure, and then start counting seven clean days. Only at the end of these could we immerse in the mikvah and once again be permissible (p. 131).

She has to remove dead cuticles or stray hairs from her body in order to make her pure. While descending the steps to mikvah, she feels, “here was the portal to adult life- once a girl, now a woman” (Mirvis, 2020, 132). Mikvah bath is a part of their orthodox culture and violating the rules is considered as a sin. Following the rules is an agreement that they would always be other (Mirvis, 2020, p.133), but tries to avoid the question.

Mikvah represents the rigid gender roles and patriarchal norms that govern the lives of women in the Jewish community. Creating a sense of impurity of one's body is a way of attributing an inferior status to that particular person. As Goffman (1963) observes, “the stigmatic mark, or stain, rendered a person's character defective, thus spoiling their identity by ascribing them a discredited status” [no pagination]. Mirvis has an urge to free from the cultural practices prevailed within her community and her bath in a non-orthodox river reflects that. She wants to have an identity of her own, breaking all the cultural norms. By bathing in another river, she is challenging the destructive gender customs and power edifices that perpetuate gender-based oppression. The mikvah, once a symbol of confinement and control, becomes a threshold to freedom, marking a transition to a more empowered and autonomous life. Mirvis (2020) says, “I was in this lake not to cleanse myself or purify myself but to open myself as wide as I could be” (p.134).

Deepthi Sukumar in *Caste is My Period* speaks about the culture of Kerala where menstruating women in upper caste are equated to women in the lower caste through various cultural practices which women have to follow during her periods. The writer also speaks on how caste and gender intersect in Kerala culture to oppress the ‘other’ which also produce unique forms of oppression.

She begins her writing by speaking about the Sabarimala temple in Kerala. Lord Ayyappan, who is worshipped in the temple, is believed to be a bachelor and the belief is that he has taken an oath of celibacy. Females above the age of ten and below the age of fifty-five are denied entry to Sabarimala.

In September 2018, the Supreme Court judgement granted women of all age groups entry into the temple, which is followed by various protests from people, including women as well from different parts of India. One of the celebrities asked, “would you take sanitary napkins seeped in menstrual blood and walk into a friend's home? You could not. And would you think it is respectable to do the same thing when you are walking into the house of God?” (NDTV 2018).

In Kerala also, like other states, menstruation is considered as a social stigma and various social and religious customs are practicing in order to restrict menstruating women from becoming a part of the ‘mainstream’ society. This ‘mainstream’ consists of non-menstruators which include males and women who are not menstruating then. Women who have their periods are the ‘others’ who have to face segregation only because of the biological process undergoing in their body. Deepthi Sukumar says that even though she belonged to an urban middle-class Indian woman, she did not experience menstrual taboos or restrictions. She is a Dalit and Dalits do not practice menstrual taboos. She speaks about the taboos practiced by the upper-class menstruating women which actually equate those with the so-called Dalit lower caste. The notion of impurity is not pertinent to Dalit women because in the social hierarchy based on caste, ‘the caste system has historically discriminated against the Dalits using economic and social prohibitions based on the notions of purity and pollution’ (Sukumar, 2020, p. 138). When Dalits themselves and their entire environs are considered to be polluting and untouchable, becoming impure only during our menstruation just did not arise. (Sukumar, 2020, p.138). Seeing menstruating upper class women as impure is a way of imposing male dominance over the females. The writer speaks of her menarche stating that she felt guilt and shame when she got her first period. She wants to conceal it from others for she thought her ‘menstrual blood was a nuisance’ (178). In Musu Bakoto Sawo's personal narrative also, we can see that she too tries to hide her first menstruation from others.

The author writes on how cultural practices on menstruation play a role in constituting caste differences in Kerala, especially in establishing the position of menstruating Dalit women as inferior to menstruating upper caste women. Menarche of upper caste women is a celebration, their families celebrated it with rituals, new clothing and feast (Sukumar, 2020, p.139). Since Deepthi is a Dalit, she has no right to enter inside the house of her classmates, who are upper castes. While waiting outside the veranda, she was not alone. She says, “often a woman from the house would be there on the veranda. My classmate explained that her mother was out-of -doors time- a water container, a plate and a stick” (139). She is making others know that she is menstruating. Deepthi says, “I grew to feel sorry for these women when I saw them sitting outside with their plate and stick, signalling to everyone that they were menstruating” (Sukumar, 2020, p.139). But she speaks of the caste discrimination saying that these women insisted to stand Deepthi outside the veranda, and after she left, “they sprinkled holy water on the place where I stood. Whether menstruating or not, Dalit women are considered impure and polluting” (Sukumar, 2020, p.139). Dalit women whether menstruating or not are considered as impure and several restrictions in the name of caste are imposed on these people. Menstruation is a universal experience, but in Kerala, caste plays a major role in shaping gender norms in the society.

Stella Nyanzi in the personal narrative *Bloody Precarious Activism in Uganda* speaks of her political activism in providing free sanitary pads to the school girls in Uganda through the #Pads4GirlsUg campaign. She was imprisoned for she spoke against Minister of Education and the president related to the unkept promise of supplying free menstrual pads to girls. The political figures speak about the poor menstrual hygiene among the school girls, but not taking any steps to provide them a better menstrual health.

Most of the girls were discontinuing their studies when their periods started because they had no sanitary pads and they soiled their dress when they were in the class. To avoid the shame, they were discontinuing their studies.

The president promised free pads to girls, but after election, the promise was reneged saying that the 'the Ministry of Education had no money in the 2016-2017 financial year to fulfil the President's promise of free sanitary pads for school girls' (Nyanzi, 2020, p.553). To provide better menstrual hygiene, #Pads4GirlsUg movement is started by stella Nyanzi. She put a face book post which was widely shared by local journalists, activists and politicians. As a part of her activism, she talked to many girls and they said that 'they began their menstrual period without having received any relevant education or talks' (Nyanzi, 2020,554). She speaks about the need for providing better menstrual education to the students from their school by including the topic in the syllabus. Demonstration of using pads, keeping hygiene and proper disposal are also should be included.

Menstruation is seen as a social taboo, and Nyanzi's activism invited the criticism of the Minister of Education. She says:

For a girl-child to tell people that 'I'm menstruating,' it was a taboo. You would not tell anyone that your period is now. That you are in the period, because it was regarded as something secret. It was only supposed to be known by the mother only. Not anyone else. Not even your sisters. Not even your brothers. Only by your mother. You would whisper to your mother. Then she would help you, teach you how to do it, how to clean yourself, how to wash your pants, how to prepare your pad and so on and so forth. And you would go to your school. Nobody would even know that you are in your period. Are our girls here? Come and learn the culture of Uganda.... Nobody is interested in knowing that you are in your period. But what is so shocking and what is so surprising is that Ugandans are waiting for President Museveni to buy pads for Uganda children... (Nyanzi, 2020, p.556).

Still menstruation as a taboo exists and girls are not ready to speak of their periods. Menstruation is biological, it is universal. Menstruating women, from whichever part of the world they be, are considered as inferior to the non- menstruators, but the stricture is in the form of caste, culture, gender etc. Deepthi Sukumar (2020) rightly says, "Menstrual taboos that deem women impure and polluting in their periods contribute to the belief system that women are inferior. This menstrual shaming of women's bodies into impure and inferior objects has allowed the male to dominate and control women and their sexuality" (p.140).

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