

Destigmatizing the Menstruating Body: Representation of Menstruation in Select Films

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Abstract

Representation of menstruation in media has been conspicuous. From advertisements that glorify and compare the use of sanitary pads to the use of cloth and the portrayal of women in movies who have been stigmatized because of the taboo associated with their bleeding bodies, the gendered norms and consequently forced oppression driven by social and cultural norms are prevalent. Menstruation and the menstruating body have been seen as a disgrace and it continues to be a vexed and contested topic even today. The menstruating body that is wrongly associated with impurity becomes susceptible to scorn and indignation primarily because of gender-based social inequality due to age-old practices, beliefs, myths, taboos, and isolation. Therefore, menstruation as a phenomenon of patriarchal dominance and gendered ostracization requires constant conscious efforts and awareness of social reality (that is related to menstruation). This paper aims to destigmatize the menstruating body through the representation of menstruation in two Indian films- *Padman*(2018)and *The Great Indian Kitchen*(2021),without bowdlerizing and emasculating the social and biological reality.

KEYWORDS: Menstruation, taboo, media texts, India.

Menstruation is a natural process that is inextricably related to a woman's body. It is undergoing an uncommon surge in prominence.India is a diverse nation with many different cultures. Menstruation has various connotations in every culture. However, most of them share the belief that menstruation blood is impure. There is evidence to support the idea that these notions have influenced how men and women view women's bodies.Traditional cultural constructions of the female body and the meanings of menstruation within Indian symbolic systems are meanings which undoubtedly have shaped Indian women's (and men's) experiences of female bodily processes (Chawla).

Women in rural areas have inadequate knowledge about menstrual health, according to Dr Rani Bang.Consequently, awareness of menstruation and counselling is essential, especially in rural settings.She states,

Cultural perceptions such as the colour of themenstrual blood govern their perception of what is normal and abnormal.They resist using sanitary napkins because it is difficult to dispose of them.They fear it might fall into the hands of someone who can use Jadutona(black magic) against them (Bang).

As a result, there are many problems related to menstrual hygiene, and there is a definite link between the taboos associated with menstruation and a lack of hygiene awareness. Urban, working, and modern women are likewise impacted by the stigma because there is no difference between them and rural women especially in this scenario.

Women who have menstrual periods are discriminated against and stigmatized as a result of the negative attitudes and preconceptions about women that the dominant group in our society perpetuates in media, including films, television, and other forms of mediated representation.

To have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power. It is consistent with the ideas about form and formlessness to treat intends coming out of seclusion as if they were themselves charged with power, hot dangerous, requiring insulation and a time for cooling down (Douglas 98).

Menstruation, its taboos, and the effects it has on women's health have never received such extensive media coverage in India's history. Such reforming zeal has never existed before. Interestingly, a popular Bollywood movie *Padman* starring Akshay Kumar, Radhika Apte, and Sonam Kapoor which was released in February 2018 served as at least some of the foundation for this novel change.

The notion of "shame" doesn't require more clarification in a country where sanitary napkins are still sold covertly, covered in black opaque plastic bags or newspapers (Parmar, 2018). The 2018 film *Padman* tells the life story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, a businessman best known for producing inexpensive sanitary pads in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The movie is set in a fictional village in North India. Lakshmikant Chauhan, who is the fictionalized character of Muruganantham, played by Akshay Kumar, intervenes in the "women's affair" out of sheer empathy for his wife Gayatri (played by Radhika Apte). When he asks her to enter the house (she is meant to stay in the outer extension with the other family members when she is on her period), she responds with a strange resistance, pleading with him to keep away from her for the sake of purity and let her use the unclean clothes.

The movie *Padman* centres around the life and work of Arunachalam Muruganantham, (characterized as Laksmikant Chauhan); a person who quit school in Tamil Nadu and created an inexpensive machine to produce sanitary napkins which Indian women in rustic and rural areas can afford and use.

The story of Muruganantham was already well known. He had been featured in the media, notably in Time magazine, which listed him as one of the top 100 influential persons in the world in 2014. His invention of a cost-effective sanitary napkin-making machine earned him many awards. *Padman*, which was among the highest three-grossing films in early 2018, helped to popularize his tale to a wider audience. And as well, initiate a discussion about menstruation, a subject that has long been taboo in India.

Muruganantham, who was raised by handloom weavers in Coimbatore, left school in the ninth grade after his father passed away. After he tied the knot with Shanthi in 1998, he learned that she, like the rest of the women in the rustic village, used rags while she menstruated. He questioned Shanthi, "Why not sanitary napkins?" She replied that if she and the remaining women in their home used disposable sanitary pads, they could not afford to buy milk for the family.

He thought as to why a product that required only basic and affordable raw materials was sold at an exorbitant price in the market. It was confusing. However,

due to the expensive price of commercially available pads, ladies were left with little choice but to use soiled rags, which frequently went without even a simple sun-drying. Unsurprisingly, this had terrible effects on the health of women. Thus began Muruganatham's mission to produce inexpensive menstrual pads.

The simple solution proposed by (Muruganatham) Lakshmi does not alter the course of things, and his will to produce affordable sanitary napkins for his wife and subsequently, all menstruating women who are unable to afford commercially made pads becomes an obsession. His desperate efforts to support practically all the ladies with his invention are met with indelible thoughts of shame, including his wife, his sisters, and the little girl going through menarche in the neighbourhood.

The initial attempts were failures. He was unaware that sanitary pads were not made of cotton, but instead of cellulose fibre. Aside from that, he lacked a sizable sample pool of ladies who were willing to try them out and provide him with feedback. If he had to wait for his wife's input once a month, a sample size of one was too inadequate and it would a very long time to design a usable pad. It was inappropriate for him to ask the women in the village neighbourhood too. Even the portrayal of medical college students is not exempt from the partially justified preconceptions and stereotypes of doubting and misunderstanding a man's intentions and awareness of sanitary napkins. One of the medical students tried to help him. He even went up to them (the female medical students) but discovered that they were faking the feedback form.

With few options left, he then decided to experiment on himself. He used an old football bladder with holes created to make an artificial uterus. Then, decoagulant was added to the animal blood, which had been obtained from the butcher, and put within this "uterus." Lakshmi served as his own test subject by wearing the football bladder under his clothes.

This could not be kept a secret anymore. He had a terrible odour, to begin with. The villagers believed he had a sexual ailment after observing him washing his blood-stained garments in the neighbourhood well. He tries desperately to see if his invention will hold up, but when he is exposed, his wife is compelled to abandon him because the panchayat sees him as a pervert. Ultimately, he becomes a castaway. The innovativeness of his concepts and the inventiveness of his creative thinking shatter in front of the accusing villagers and the story of shame told by his wife.

Unperturbed, Lakshmi persevered, persuading medical students to use his handmade pads and then return them used so he could test their absorbency. When his mother saw him riffling through the sanitary pads, she too left.

Lakshmi left his village. He learned that cellulose fibre, not cotton wool, was used to make sanitary pads while working as a domestic help for a college lecturer who encouraged and helped him to send letters to multinational corporations. The cellulose was like hard boards that needed to be converted by a machine into soft absorbent material. After being compressed into a rectangular shape and covered in non-woven fabric, the absorbent material was sterilized with ultraviolet light and packaged for sale.

Therefore, making napkins was not the objective; rather, inventing a machine that produced them was the key. The prototype created by Muruganatham was made up of four smaller parts that carried out each stage of production rather than a single

large, pricey machine that performed all the functions. Up to two fifty sanitary napkins could be produced every day by the manually run machine. This machine cost less than seventy- five thousand rupees.

The marketing strategy was a breakthrough in itself. Muruganatham had no interest in selling the patent for enormous money. The objective was to use the machine and empower India's underprivileged women.

Groups of women, voluntary organizations, and nonprofit organizations purchased Muruganatham's machine to operate and recover their initial investment through the sale of their production unit. In this manner, the groups would empower and employ economically disadvantaged rural women while also promoting the use of menstrual pads.

Menstrual taboo is addressed in a significant part of the film *The Great Indian Kitchen* about domestic violence and how it is perceived. Little did the young dancer (Nimisha Sajayan) know when she was married off into a prominent family that their orthodox and oppressive attitudes and emotional abuse would turn her life into a living hell. In the name of tradition, her ambition to become a dancer and pursue a career as an independent woman is crushed as the home, notably the kitchen, is transformed into a hostile environment. When her first period starts at her in-law's place, her sociocultural upbringing takes precedence over her logical judgement, and she voluntarily uses the outhouse.

However, her husband (played by Suraj Venjaramoodu) and her father-in-law (played by T. Suresh Babu) are participating in a month-long ritual honouring lord Ayyappan, therefore that act of separation may not be enough. Jeo Baby, the director of the film skillfully timed the wife's periods to clash with the Sabarimala lord's festival. The wife's opposition is exacerbated by the aunt-in-law's meticulous attention to detail regarding the do's and don'ts of her periods.

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)

To highlight how institutionalized women's positions are in society and how they accept their lack of agency, Baby purposefully created the characters of the aunt and mother-in-law. Her effort to help her husband when he falls off a scooter is met with criticism because she is believed to be impure, signalling the severity of the menstrual phase and the lack of compassion from her in-laws. The film focuses on an unbiased portrayal of the realities of the majority of women in India daily rather than offering a solution to the issues surrounding menstrual taboos. The movie also depicts the mob assault on the woman who posted on social media in favour of the Sabarimala judgement of the Supreme Court.

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)

The rage of the husband (spurred by the chief priest during their month-long offerings) towards the wife's act of voicing her concerns and arguments related to menstruation on social media contributes to the film's premise.

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).

Another kind of media text that often tries to complicate the problem of menstruation is advertisements for sanitary pads. Most of the sanitary pad commercials that repeatedly appear on television focus on the fear of blood stains and how to prevent them. The changes that have been made to the sanitary napkin's design are intended to ensure that a woman who is menstruating does not feel embarrassed about the stain and can engage in day-to-day activity.

Interestingly, the same advertising industry, while making commercials for detergents, uses the ad slogan "daaglagne se agar kuch achcha hotahai, to daagachchhai" (translated as "if a stain paves the way for something nice, then the stain is good"). Women have been systematised from an early age into the idea that they must control their bodies and keep within certain limits. In India, men's lived experiences of the body present a jarring contrast. Indian men commonly urinate in public, which may support this claim. India works on two extremities of body mobility-related challenges and problems.

According to Prerna Singh in her article "Omission of Menstruation in Female-Centric Bollywood Movies" (2021), the "pattern of minimal to no representation of menstruation in Indian cinema becomes even more profound and problematic when it becomes part of contemporary 'female-centric' films—a relatively new phenomenon which focuses on female protagonists and stories," "When it comes to discussing the subject of menstruation, the issue appears to be one of conscious oblivion. The patriarchal culture views women as objects (bodies) created to support the system and serve its needs. Selected media texts about the menstruating body in India mainly emphasize decreased corporeal mobility and menstruation hygiene-related issues. Only a small percentage of the issue may be resolved by removing the menstrual hygiene crisis or the stigma associated with discussing it. The (un)tabooing calls for more. Beyond the utilitarian concept or aspect of a heteronormative patriarchal society, it necessitates an optimization of the female body to realize its full potential.

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