



# MENSTRUATION IS 'POWER' NOT 'SHAME'

**Dr. Neetu Sharma**

Faculty, Department of English

B.S.N.V.P.G.College, Lucknow

Neetusharma199517@gmail.com

**Abstract:** Today we are living in a highly developed, technically advanced 21<sup>st</sup> century but still various traditional beliefs intermingled with misconception, myths, taboos and orthodoxical practices, which are prevalent in the society that need conscious attention and reformation. One of such practices is the imposition of many restrictions upon a menstruating woman by considering her as impure during that period and menstrual blood as superstitiously dangerous like sorcery etc. The practice of isolation and restrictions upon these women reinforce negative attitude towards this unavoidable natural, normal and biological process. The exercise of “menstruosity” (Williams) is a strong web of social religious and cultural practice that not only became a taboo but numerous myths began to come out from half-baked tales most of which lack authenticity.

**Keywords:** Cycle, Awareness, Education, Power, Restrictions, Freedom,

Menstruation, monthly, period or *rajaswola* etc. refer to the process when a female body bleeds every month. The first menstrual cycle of a female's life is called 'menarche', which signals the beginning of the capability of child bearing and reproduction. It comes in every girl's life from the age of twelve to fifteen years. Every girl experiences menarche at different age. The time of menarche depends on genetic, biological and environmental factors but especially the nutritional one. In a developing country, the menarche may start at the age of eight due to malnutrition while in a developed country from the age of twelve to fifteen. In the course of life, the human body develops and grows. After certain age, the growth stops and deterioration begins. The biological process of growth and decay is monitored by hormonal secretion. The rise and fall of certain hormones in a female body cause Menstruation. Menstruation stops with the occurrence of menopause that usually occurs from the age of forty-five to fifty-five. Menstruation plays a vital role in pregnancy. Pregnancy needs this cycle because this cycle makes the lining of the uterus thick and helps in growing eggs, the very basis of the child bearing. If a child to the parents and family is important, the menstruation naturally justifies the potential of the woman to be a mother.

It was unwanted to bring up openly about the menstruation early 19s, But Doris Lessing's superlative works have widely pertained to the political and social radical changes. She is well liked and appreciated for her multi-dimensional status such as a feminist, eco-friend, socialist, Marxist, and postcolonial writer. With her bravery, she looks at the detail of the experience of a menstruating woman in her splendid, work *The Golden Notebook* through her protagonist Anna who worries about her period days as everywoman. She also faces various mood swings, cramps and irritation. Anna feels that period days have an effect on the integrity of her work and makes her irritable. Anna Says:

I notice a stain of blood. But surely it's not time yet for my period? I hastily check dates, and realise yes, it's today. Suddenly I feel tired and irritable, because these feelings accompany my periods. (I wondered if it would be better not to choose today to write down everything I felt; then decided to go ahead. It was not planned; I had forgotten about the period. I decided that the instinctive feeling of shame and modesty was dishonest: no emotion for a writer.) I stuff my vagina with the tampon of cotton wool, and am already on my way downstairs, when I remember I've forgotten to take a supply of tampons with me. I am late. I roll tampons into my handbag, concealing them under a handkerchief, feeling more and more irritable. At the same time I am telling myself that if I had not noticed my period had started, I would not be feeling nearly so irritable. But all the same, I must control myself now, before leaving for work, or I'll find myself cracking into bad temper in the office. (Lessing 249)

A menstruating woman experiences many traumatic physical, emotional and mental troubles. Anna finds that period days affect her writing a lot, transfer her to the emotional state, and affect her psychologically where she does not make herself able to write freely and at the end of the day, she doubts on the result of that day. She says:

The fact I am having a period is no more than an entrance into an emotional state, recurring regularly, that is of no particular importance; I know that as soon as I write the word 'blood,' it will be giving a wrong emphasis, and even to me when I come to read what I've written. And so I begin to doubt the value of a day's recording before I've started to record it. (Lessing 250). The repressive negative attitude and taboos towards a menstruating woman make her life more miserable psychologically. "Extended family firmly objected to girls visiting religious places during their period, for fear of hampering the 'purity' of the place. We were routinely told to wear black pants to 'avoid embarrassment'. There was nothing worse than the world knowing you bled!"(Upadhy).

In many societies, menstruating women are kept in seclusion and remain unattended. Menstruation is not a curse or the impure stage but a normal, natural, hormonal, biologically important process, which deserves due understanding and consideration. A female during this period, needs care and attention. The society forms different norms and regulations according to its socio-political and economic circumstances. Many aspects of life may be significant at different period of history depending upon that time's situation. In the past centuries, the earlier menstruating women faced lack of advance supporting aids in comparison to modern women. Today women are capable of handling the period with comfort and hygiene, as they are equipped with various supporting aid like sanitary napkins, tampons and menstrual cups etc. There is a remarkable difference of physical work performed by the earlier women and women today. Those women had to execute difficult physical activities to complete their daily routine life works. It seems logical that in order to provide rest and comfort to those early menstruating women, lacking proper supporting aid and reusing clothe in unhygienic manner, some considerate and wise people devised to keep them isolated and forbade to do household chores. Thus, they could endure the stress and suffering of that particular period in an easy and relaxed way. But over a period of time it might have distorted, acquired new interpretation and turned into a discriminatory process that started considering it as impure and unclean. It imposed many restrictions upon women like they are being forbidden from entering in the *pooja* room and kitchen. They are not allowed to touch the Holy books, pickles, to cook food etc. being considered unclean and unhygienic during this cycle and contaminating or defiling by touching any of them. As Saru the protagonist of the fiction *The Dark Holds No Terror*, feels restrictions and is exiled from the room, the same way the main character from Bapsi Sidhwa's *The Crow Eaters*, has opposite experience. She feels a kind of freedom when she is left isolated along with many restrictions for each month. Although she finds her time to live alone but somewhere she also experiences as Saru does. "She knew she couldn't help herself to pickles or preserves for they would spoil at her touch. Flowers, too, were known to wilt when touched by women in her condition." (Sidhwa).

They are not allowed to water plants because their impurity will defile plants to withering. The same kind of representation of a menstruating woman's experience has been portrayed in a fictional work, Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* through the protagonist Saru. She is tortured as that, she is impure and polluted during her menstrual cycle. She feels herself confined and within boundary that she cannot cross during her these days. She says, "It was just torture. Not just the three days when I couldn't enter the kitchen or the puja room. Not just the sleeping on a straw mat covered with a thin sheet. Not just the feeling of being a pariah, with my special cup and plate by my side in which I was served from a distance, for my touch was, it seemed, pollution. No, it was something quite different, much worse. A kind of shame that engulfed me" (Deshpande). For Saru menstruation is fraught with

anxieties during her days. This fiction illuminates the fear felt by menstruating woman about various changes in body as well as the societal fear that allows them to think that menstruating woman is an impure, polluted or a threat.

Like Lessing, Miranda July also breaks the typical narrow-minded thoughts over periods. She breaks the boundaries and unlimit the very important discussion and do converse about it in her short story “The Metal Bowl”. She also discusses the existing myths related to periods.

The myths regarding Menstruation are prevailing in different spheres of the world. Jane Austen’s works are also women centric. In her splendid work *Pride and Prejudice*, she talks about periods of Bennet sisters.

In some cultures, women bury their menstrual used cloth to prevent the bad impact of the evil spirits. It is believed that menstrual blood is very dangerous and others can do black magic with it to cause harm her. The belief is also prevalent that women can impose their will on or control men with the help of their menstrual blood. Water is the medium of purification and to save water from getting impure, the women are not allowed to take baths in river or waterfall during their menstrual period. In Afghanistan, too, it is believed that women on her Menstruation cycle should not take bath otherwise she will become infertile. It is also believed that if such woman touches a cow, the cow will become impure and infertile too. Some people believe that if a woman goes to the ocean while on her period, she will be attacked by the shark because of the smell of her blood. In Japan, the myth is, that a menstruating female chef cannot make sushi because her impure condition imbalances the taste and sushi cannot be prepared deliciously. In Iran Menstruation is considered a disease. In our neighbor country Nepal, women are not allowed to live with their family in the house during their menstrual cycle. They are forced to live outside even in cold. They are given a place to live, which is called goth. The goth is the horribly stinking place where animals are kept. This cultural practice is not only for the women having periods but the new mother and her newborn baby also have to follow this rule, even if the baby is delivered in the hospital. At any cost, both, mother and the newborn child have to live in goth. There is also gender discrimination in this goth. If the woman gives birth to a baby boy, she will have to stay in goth for lesser time than in the case of a baby girl. Though these women can touch the animals but they are not allowed to give their tasted food to these animals.

Contrary to the above discussion, in the multicultural India the menstruation is celebrated at many places. In Odisha women organize three day long *Raj Prabha* ceremony to celebrate her puberty and they believe that *Bhudevi* menstruates during these three days. In the same way in Tamil Nadu, women organize a turmeric bathing ceremony called *Manjal Neerattu Visha* in which they celebrate her first period and she is gifted her first *saree*. In Karnataka, a girl’s puberty is celebrated in the “Half Saree function”, *The Ritushuddhi* or *Ritu Kala samaskara*. In this ceremony, she is gifted her first *saree*, which she puts on by folding it half-length until her marriage. In this way, her puberty is embraced in Karnataka. Also in the other five states of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra a five day long festival, “Maasika Mahotsav” is celebrated that raises awareness of menstruation and menstrual hygiene.(Agarwal)

Like these Indian states, in other countries as South Africa, Japan, Philippines, Brazil, Italy, Iceland, Israel and even in Canada, a girl’s puberty, the transition from girlhood to womanhood, is celebrated. They do not stigmatize the first period of girl. They consider it as auspicious and welcome her womanhood by celebrating with various traditions. (11 First Period Traditions)

Earlier due to the lack of hygienic napkins and pads, women used to reuse cloth repeatedly for more time and were more vulnerable to infections. Lack of napkins, unavailability of clean clothes and impression of infection forced them to stop going to school, cooking, and touching food. They were not allowed to wander here and there. The five days for menstruating women were assigned for rest and relax their body. But today we have all types of sanitary pads, tampons, and menstrual cups that help women and avoid infections. It does not mean that today’s menstruating modern working women do not have to face menstrual pain. They also face various traumas, pain and mood swings. Damini yadav has clearly depicted the pain of menstruating woman in highly technologically developed modern society. She writes:

My legs have no strength to walk

Thighs feel like stones, My intestines are clenching with pain

And the wails emanating from the pain

Are clenched in my jaws.  
Yesterday when at the shop  
I whispered for 'Whisper' pads  
Amid the frozen gaze of all people present. Wrapped in a black plastic bag  
The shopkeeper secretly handed me  
That thing.  
Today, the whole body  
Is wriggling in pain.  
I try to sit on my office chair  
But all in vain.  
What do I do with this five- day trouble?  
Can't even take leave  
And sleep at home,  
My colleague gives a side-glance,  
And gives a loaded smile.  
I am an expert at my work  
But this pain make me a dork.  
To his cabin, the boss calls me...  
To scold, instructing me to be more diligent;  
Conveniently he forgets twenty-five days of overtime.  
And as he casts a flying glance  
At my pale face, he thinks of some  
'Whisper' ad.  
Suppressing the sternness in his voice  
By some eighty percent  
He says, "Finish the work  
In four days,"  
Stepping out, a discomfort creeps in.  
No, I wasn't worried about  
A stain on the back of my dress.  
It was a wave of relief  
That I bought those eight pads  
For eighty rupees  
To 'have a happy period.'  
In my ears echoed a suppressed laughter  
"These women can't let go off  
The flag of equality when every month  
They can't even manage their bodies.  
Good that men handle their tantrums  
And give them a chance to be equal."  
O men,  
The same blood and flesh  
The flows on to the sanitary napkins



And in drains  
 Is put to use  
 As raw material for your existence.  
 And these period pains  
 Are a rehearsal  
 For the nine good months  
 When I risk my life  
 To bring you into this world.  
 So dear men,  
 Don't laugh at my pain.  
 Thanks to my periods  
 I can covert a fetus into a human.

The absence of knowledge regarding Menstruation as a natural biological process has had made a taboo and even today many social and cultural norms are in practice. These taboos are not only ridiculous and heartrending but also drag women back to achieve their goal, identity and right to live freely in modern society. Such social taboos need to be eradicated. With the help of education and awareness, we can create a sense of satisfaction and happiness that Menstruation is helpful, not shameful. We can empower women through the right awareness and education. Now with the change, the time has come to speak up clearly and conscientiously about this biological reproductive function. Speaking about problems is a step to endeavor to solve it. Not only the women but also all adult people should be told about the misconception about the menstruation. They should have proper education of the reproductive function that can help to have a positive and respectful attitude towards women and to help and support them during their painful suffering period for their psychological well-being.

#### Works Cited and Consulted

- Agarwal, Hemanshi. "Festivals That Celebrate Menstruation, Women, and Periods." *In Sync Blog by Nua*, 8 July 2021, <https://nuawoman.com/blog/menstruation-festival-in-india/>.
- Deshpande, Shashi. *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Penguin, 2000.
- Lessing, Doris. *The Golden Notebook*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1962.
- Londhe, Sushama. *Nature Worship*. Hindu Wisdom, [Hindu Wisdom - Nature Worship](#).
- StoriesAsia. "Women in Nepal Face 40 Restrictions During Periods." – *The Diplomat*, For The Diplomat, 8 Dec. 2019, [thediplomat.com/2019/12/women-in-nepal-face-40-restrictions-during-periods/](http://thediplomat.com/2019/12/women-in-nepal-face-40-restrictions-during-periods/).
- Sidhwa, Bapsi. *The Crow Eater*. Penguin Random House India Pvt. Ltd. 1978.
- Standing, Kay, and Sara L. Parker. "Girls' and Women's Rights to Menstrual Health in Nepal." *IGI Global*, IGI Global, 1 Jan. 1970, [www.igi-global.com/chapter/girls-and-womens-rights-to-menstrual-health-in-nepal/188903](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/girls-and-womens-rights-to-menstrual-health-in-nepal/188903).
- Sureis. "Menstruation: Let's Not Make It Taboo - The Himalayan Times - Nepal's No.1 English Daily Newspaper: Nepal News, Latest Politics, Business, World, Sports, Entertainment, Travel, Life Style News." *The Himalayan Times*, Himalayantimes, 17 Sept. 2019, [thehimalayantimes.com/opinion/Menstruation-lets-not-make-it-taboo](http://thehimalayantimes.com/opinion/Menstruation-lets-not-make-it-taboo).
- Updahya, Revati. "Myths and Taboos Silence Menstruating Women in India". The Establishment. May 2016.
- Pip Williams, *The Dictionary of Lost Words*.

“11 First Period Traditions from around the World That Celebrate a Girl's Journey into Womanhood.” *IndiaTimes*, 21 Jan. 2018, <https://www.indiatimes.com/culture/11-first-period-traditions-from-around-the-world-that-celebrate-a-girl-s-journey-into-womanhood-338129.html>.

Yadav, Damini. “Periods”, translated by Anand Khatri, *Hans Magazine*, 2015.

युवा लेखिका दामिनी यादव ([mediamirror.in](http://mediamirror.in))

