



Patriarchy, Menstruation Taboo and Right to Worship

Rajashree Nath, Post Graduate student, Sivasagar, Assam

Abstract: Right to equality and freedom of religion both are considered as the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution of India. However, both male and female don't get the equal right in terms of worshipping God. Almost all women of India get the less support from religious institution. People try to consider that menstruation is the main factor through which they can't play the dominant role in religious institutions. Menstruation is a biological phenomenon unique to female only. Although it is a biological phenomenon it has always been surrounded by taboos and myths that exclude women from various aspect of life. Many women are subjected to restrictions from their daily lives simply because they are menstruating. They are not allowed to enter the religious institutions during menstruation. This article will try to elaborate the women position in religious institutions from the perspective of post colonial and feminism.

Keywords: Patriarchy, taboo, religion

I. INTRODUCTION

Most feminists argue that religion act as a conservative force, maintain the status quo. For feminists, that status quo is a patriarchal society. Patriarchy works as a vehicle for coercing women to accept gender oppression through religion, in order to maintain the cohesion of the male dominated social system in India. Simone De Beauvoir(1953) took a very similar view to traditional Marxists, only instead of seeing religion as the subjugation of workers, she saw it as exploiting and oppression of women. Religion itself can promote patriarchy in various ways. In the religious scriptures and teachings women are always play in the secondary positions. The religious teachings for women is about the role of nurturing, caring, feeding children, following all the wifely duties, etc. apart from these religious texts are also the full of male Gods, male prophets, male saints. The books are written by man from their own perspective. God does not mentioned about the discrimination between man and women for doing some things separately. But it is the ideology of patriarchy which dominant women to worshipping god.

Menstruation matters more than most people in society are willing to recognise. It is deeply embedded in the global body politics and is a major contribution to the vast gender inequity between man and women today. Institutionalised hierarchies maintain and support the outdated patriarchal belief that menstruation makes the female body inferior to the male body. For many modern thinkers, the word 'taboo' unconsciously evokes primitive people from long ago or far away- people who unconsciously obey arbitrary rules that restrict their lives and thoughts. Throughout the 20th century India underwent several political and cultural changes, including the independence from British in the 1940s and their declaration as a secularised nation. Even secular, India has been unable to remove itself from the menstrual taboos, a practice that emerged in connection with religion and continues to function within Indian culture. Today, whether it is carried out for religious practices or not and despite how it is understood the taboo is undoubtedly a part of Indian culture. The menstrual taboo as it exists in India originates from a Hindu belief in the impurity of menstrual blood and the impurity of women in general. However, taboos can emerge around any practice or topic, not exclusively menstruation; a taboo is a negative attitude towards or an unspoken aversion to something. A menstrual taboo is a social restriction or negative connotation attached to female menstruation and is not specific to one region or religious practice.

The Vedas are the source of truth and knowledge and are held as sacred in the Hindu faith. Hindus place immense importance on purity and work to avoid pollution in all aspects of their lives. It is believed that anything that is removed from the human body is impure. For this reason, menstruating women were marked as impure and a taboo emerged around them. Women are not the only people that are considered to be impure. The outcasts often fell into an association with the untouchable, much like women. The Hindu aversion to impurity demonstrates that Hinduism doesn't despise women, but that the abhorrence of impurity can and has been used to justify negative treatment of women, which supports the system of patriarchy. It can be argued that the Hindu aversion to impurity in any sense shows the use of specific aspects of the religion that are highlighted to support a social attitude towards women and give it religious

backing. According to J.L. Brockington, these taboos and the fear of pollution are connected with the caste system; Brahmins, being the upper caste and the group from which ritual specialists are chosen, were kept separate from the lower caste to protect themselves from pollution, thus protecting their religion. These restrictions are still in practice and have even grown stricter over time. People who handled dead animals, cleaned latrines, and washermen, along with others, have all been considered “untouchable” by the Hindu caste system because of the danger they pose to religious purity.

From the perspective of post modernism and feminism menstruation taboo is a socially constructed phenomena. The patriarchal discourses have used the process of menstruation to socially define women and their standing within the social hierarchy. This narcissistic male worldview has historically pinned women’s reproductive biology against them as religious, medical, and economic discourses have been exercised to socially subjugate and inscribe the menstrual body with symbolic cultural “text” (Lee 1994: 343). These cultural inscriptions mark the female body as a site of reproduction, not only for the material continuity of the human race, but also for the more intangible proliferation of societal norms and values. While both girls and boys are socialized into prescribed gender scripts by the age of five, girls are given special instruction in femininity maintenance at the onset of puberty which stipulates female docility through bodily subordination (West and Zimmerman 1987; Lee 1994; Merskin 1999; Kissling 2006). The ultimate aim of proper feminine socialization is a woman who has internalized dominant sociocultural and historically salient discourses thus cultivating a well-developed sense of self as object (Kissling 2006).

In many ways woman’s subordination is rooted in the menstrual body, as menstruation is socially perceived to be the essence of womanhood which upholds the binary and perpetuates her objectified and Othered status (Kissling 2006). Yet menstruation in and of itself does not make woman Other, but instead the menstrual cycle is denigrated as it is linked to the inferior female identity. Simond De Beauvoir states, that menstrual blood: does not make woman impure; it is rather a sign of her impurity. Gloria Steinem in her 1982 satirical piece, “If Men Could Menstruate.” argued that because men construct the binary they hold power to lay claim and name that which is deemed good and normal in the social world. Therefore, if men could “men-struate”, their bleeding bodies would represent a “boast worthy, masculine event” due to their privileged social standing (Steinem 1982: 388). Instead, the menstrual cycle is constructed negatively due to the structurally embedded, institutionalized nature of the gender dichotomy which devalues and separates the female condition from that of men (Stubbs and Costos 2004; MacDonald, 2007). This construction socially positions women in dualistic opposition to men; subsequently tabooing and stigmatizing their bleeding bodies in order to legitimate the status of woman as subordinated, as Other. The dualistic gender binary can also be viewed in premodern societies as scholars suggest that nearly every culture and religion has socially constructed taboos surrounding menstrual blood (Delaney, et al.1988; Lee 1994; Merskin 1999). While the discourses and meanings surrounding the menstrual taboo have varied, premodern agrarian societies tended to construct menstruation in paradoxical and contradictory ways.

In many preindustrial patriarchal societies the taboo surrounding menstrual blood was powerful as women were restricted from full participation in tribal life through a veil of religious discourses. Such discourses posed menstruating bodies as dangerous, socially unruly, and spiritually impure. Today, taboos regarding female bodies and menstrual blood can still be observed in some orthodox patriarchal, religious traditions which include, but are not limited to, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (Delaney, et al.1988). Thus, cross-cultural analysis suggests that many premodern, patriarchal societies defined women’s social standing through the taboo of menstrual blood.

The major reason for feminists to break the menstrual silence is to be proactive in terms of health and safety concerns regarding the use of mass produced menstrual products. Women should not have to feel stigmatized by menstruation nor should they have to wait for another health crisis to occur before they are informed of the dangers of female care products. Menstrual activism can help remedy women’s misconceptions regarding the safe use of menstrual products through unbiased education that offers alternatives to the commercial advertisements selling feminine hygiene commodities. Furthermore, such education should highlight the connection between women’s health and the environmental devastation incurred by single-use menstrual products. Such information would allow women to take control of their bodies by making educated choices in regard to their health. Moreover, adopting a positive “menstrual consciousness” is a reflection of social agency and when this agency is practiced in numbers there exist the powerful potential to create a social environment which strengthens the lives of girls and women through the promotion of bodily respect, health and well-being.

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