

The Crimson Journey from Taboo to Etiquette

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Abstract

Menstruation, an event which is central to the feminine world, has been cloaked in shame, silence and secrecy for centuries. This paper discusses 'menstrual etiquette', namely, hiding or concealment, secrecy and special use of language and attempts to point out the existence of menstrual etiquette in the contemporary society through an analysis of selected menstrual poems- "Tampons" and "First Menstruation" by Ellen Bass, "Taboo" by Jennifer Boire and "Ode on Periods" by Bernadette Mayer. The concept of menstrual etiquette helps us to distinguish the social aspects of menstruation from the biological and also makes us aware of the prevailing attitude of the society towards menstruation. Most anthropological researches around menstruation deal with menstrual taboos and customs. However, even though the hold of menstrual taboos has decreased, there still prevails the idea of an 'appropriate' behaviour or etiquette with respect to menstruation. The objective of the paper is to point out that although gone are the days of menstrual taboos, menstruation is still not accepted as a normal process and we live in an era of menstrual etiquette. It is still perceived as unclean or embarrassing and remains a taboo topic for many. Menstruation is an event which is organic to the feminine consciousness and a healthy attitude with respect to menstruation is essential for a complete female liberation. The study neither delves into an anthropological, cultural or scientific study of menstruation nor does it call for a politicisation of menstruation; rather it advocates a complete acceptance and understanding of menstruation as it is. Such a study is highly relevant because even in the modern, developed and 'feminist' world, there are many socially caused discomforts and oppressions associated with the experience of menstruation.

Keywords: menstruation, etiquette, concealment, secrecy, silence, language

Menstruation

Menstruation has been cloaked in shame, negativity, silence, secrecy and privacy for centuries. For a long time, it was viewed as something to be minimised, managed and made invisible. However, for women, menstruation is not something which can be ignored or neglected. Menstrual problems are still an extremely important issue because they affect how girls view themselves as well as their self- confidence. Menstrual activism, which emerged by the 1970s, is an outgrowth of mid- to- late twentieth century feminist women’s health activism. It has emerged as a popular topic in contemporary feminism studies in the last two decades. Activists strive to eradicate the social stigma associated with menstruation and they also challenge common myths about menstruation.

Menstrual Etiquette

In the twenty- first century, in spite of all claims of modernity and progress, people are still averse to the idea of menstrual blood. The event of menstruation, today, is largely governed by a ‘menstrual etiquette’. While most scholars and anthropologists talk of ‘menstrual taboos’, the English sociologist Sophie Laws prefers to use the term ‘menstrual etiquette’ to refer to the social rules heeded by both men and women in relation to menstruation. These social rules constrain the discussion, behaviour and attitude around menstruation. The term ‘etiquette’ is defined by Edward Norbeck as rules of behaviour governing social relations among people of distinct social status or class, hierarchical or non- hierarchical. He also suggests that etiquette is important in modern societies, especially in relation to defining and preserving the social status of men and women, where it continues to reflect and support formal and informal relations to authority (qtd. in Laws 43). Menstrual etiquette, in simple terms, is a wide range of social practices associated with menstruation and it is enforced by social sanctions, such as adverse comment or criticism, ridicule, and ostracism.

Hiding or Concealment

Menstrual etiquette is driven by a single rule- “women may not draw men’s attention to menstruation in any way” (Laws 43). The most common and ‘important’ elements of the menstrual etiquette are hiding or concealment, public/ private distinction, secrecy and silence or special use of language. Adherence to the menstrual etiquette is expected even in the most intimate settings (e.g.: within the family).

Hiding is an obvious aspect of the menstrual etiquette and it requires that sanitary wear must be hidden from men. Even when menstrual products remain a vital aspect of women’s lives, they are expected to buy, store, and use them without men noticing it. The second significant element of the menstrual etiquette is the public/ private distinction. Direct references to menstruation are generally avoided in a public setting such as workplace, colleges etc. Secrecy is another crucial aspect of menstrual etiquette. Even within the family, menstruation is always kept as a secret among the female members. Such secrecy within the family affects both men and women. It creates in men a notion that menstruation is an only female business where they have no role to play and develops in them an attitude of insensitivity or indifference towards menstruation. Women, on the other hand, get the feeling that menstruation is something to be hidden from men.

Menstrual Language

Perhaps the most important, commonly observed and also the most strictly followed of all elements of menstrual etiquette is the special use of language. The fact that our language fails to capture the subtle nuances, complexities, ambiguities and tension associated with the experience of menarche and menstruation is indeed a matter which deserves attention because language profoundly shapes our perceptions and experiences. For example, ‘sanitary napkin’ makes us think about sanitation, keeping clean and the dirtiness of menstrual blood. A ‘special’ use of language, in public or private settings, with respect to menstruation reinforces the idea that menstruation is not something to be talked about openly.

Poetry and Menstrual Etiquette

One notices a subtle portrayal of the menstrual etiquette in the poems selected for the study- “Tampons” and “First Menstruation” by Ellen Bass, “Taboo” by Jennifer Boire and “Ode on Periods” by Bernadette Mayer.

Ellen Bass, through her poem “Tampons”, mainly rallies against the commercial menstrual products which often prove to be uncomfortable and even harmful. She clearly explains that young girls are never ‘educated’ about menstruation. The fact that menstruation is never spoken of in the private and public realm instills in her a feeling that she must never speak about menstruation. As a young girl, the poet is even scared to speak about it to her elders or peers. In her adolescence, she is simply given a set of products- “tampons” (23), “jar of vaseline” (12), “little cups” (41), “diaphragms” (48) etc. to ‘manage’ menstruation, ‘hide’ her ‘leaking’ body and to conceal all evidence of menstruation. Even though she is confused and does not know how to use these products, she tries to do it on her own, afraid to break the cloud of silence around menstruation. She says, “It took me years to learn to use them... I didn’t even know where the hole was” (11- 13).

Indirect References

The poet’s use of the expression “hole” (13) instead of definite names of female private body parts illustrates how several adolescent girls and even women lack a proper knowledge of their private body parts. The speaker in the poem struggles to use her tampons and experiences a discomfort with her body because she does not know where the “hole” (13) is. She is embarrassed at the very idea of touching ‘down there’ (vagina). Hence, “the girls’ lack of . . . knowledge about their bodies. . . has direct and often painful and frustrating effects on their management of menstruation” (Fingerson 25).

Learning Correct/Approved Usage

As the poet grew up, she became familiar with other techniques to ‘contain’ menstruation. Such sanitary protection became popular from the nineteenth century, with the intervention of medicine and commerce in to the domain of menstruation. Bobel points out that “sanitary protection became markers of modernity, class privilege, and respectability. . .

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menstrual etiquette increasingly engaged autonomous teens as consumers” (33). The poet, at adolescence, is instilled with the notion that menstruation is a ‘sickness’ or an ‘abnormal’ condition that needs to be managed. Hence, she is asked to swallow “ping and gray darvons, round/ chalky midols from the bottle with the smiling girl” (2- 3). The “smiling girl” is the one who successfully ‘manages’ her menstruation and hides all evidence of her bleeding body.

In the poem " First Menstruation," when the poet has her menarche, her mother simply hands her “Kotex and belt” (10) and “showed me how to wear it” (11). However, the poet is perplexed as “mom didn’t say anything” (17). By simply being mum about her menarche, her mother actually conveys to her the idea that a girl ought to be silent and secretive when it comes to menstruation. Later, the poet is ushered into a room full of women and is advised indirectly that she must never talk about or discuss menstruation with the male members of the family. As soon as girls have their menarche, they are urged to act ‘ladylike’ in ways that restrict the freedom of behavior they had enjoyed in the past. Although the poet is quite confused at the “strange” (16) attitude of the women, she nevertheless follows their words as she realises that she is no longer a child, but a “woman- child, standing with the older women” (20). The poem also emphasises the role of the mothers and other “older women” (20) in teaching menstrual etiquette to young girls.

“Taboo” by Jennifer Boire

Menstrual etiquette is most clearly expressed in the poem “Taboo” by Jennifer Boire. The speaker and her friends, out on a trip, are trapped in a lodge due to sudden flood. The speaker suddenly discovers that she is menstruating and is horrified when she realises that she does not have menstrual products to ‘conceal’ her menstruation. The absence of menstrual products horrifies the speaker not due to their lack per se, but because of the fact that without them, she will not be able to ‘hide’ or mask her menstruation from the rest of the crew. Thus it is not menstruation as such, but her failure to subscribe to the menstrual etiquette that shocks the speaker. She is unable to tell about it to anyone and proceeds to deal with it silently. She cannot even reveal this to her boyfriend as she believes that “men must be protected from the curse” (13). The following lines clearly illustrate the speaker’s shock, her desire to talk about it to someone and the resultant helplessness.

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No Kotex in the washroom
No one to tell this to...
Can't tell my boyfriend, men
Must be protected from the curse. (9- 13)

Utterly helpless, the speaker, who is probably a young girl, cries “alone in a darkened high school/ washroom, feeling cursed” (15- 16). The entire poem reverberates the age- old belief of menstruation as a ‘curse’ and menstrual blood as ‘dirty’ and as a ‘source of pollution’. Female sexual parts are seen as “the part that gets disgusted/ touching or even smelling it” (3- 4). Menstruation also gives the speaker in the poem a feeling of being “trapped” (8) and “cursed” (16).

“Ode on Periods”

Bernadette Mayer in her “Ode on Periods” comments on the absence of discussions on menstruation not only in the private and public life but also in literature. It is part of menstrual etiquette to avoid all references to menstruation in literature. Female experiences have been absent from all major discourses. Thus, Mayer remarks rather sarcastically that “Aristotle never thought of women at all” (3). While the penis has been glorified and written about, female desire, vagina, menstruation etc. have all been deemed as unworthy of literary study. They are not even fit to be potential topics for literary works. Mayer comments, “It [penis] can be the subject of an academic poem. . . .Never the monthly menstruations will she” (5- 7). She regards male-centered literature which caters to and eulogises the experiences of men as part of a “dumb poetic tradition” (19). She thus extends the idea of concealment of menstruation from day- to- day life to larger realms like literature. Her observations are remarkable since literature is a mirror of the society. Another aspect is that literature is a public realm. Hence, once there are literary works on ‘taboo’ topics, it naturally elicits thought- provoking discussions on such topics. Thus, creative works on menstruation play a fundamental role in bringing ‘it’ to the open and once ‘it’ is out in the open, away from all secrecy and mystification, it naturally reduces the shame and stigma associated with menstruation.

However, Mayer is also aware that menstruation is less likely to appear in the literary realm as girls themselves are kept in ignorance about this central event in their lives. She says, “at least I knew what it was, some girls didn’t then/ We were told you can’t go swimming but don’t you wanna have/ children” (22- 24). These lines reveal that girls are never given accurate information about menstruation. Often mothers and other “older women” (“First Mentsruation” 20) are more concerned about teaching the girls menstrual etiquette rather than ‘educating’ them on menstruation as such.

Mayer also talks about the special use of language with respect to menstruation. She points out that there have been a few literary works on menstruation, but such works hide the real experience of menstruation and simply make references to images of moon, magic or anthropological data on bizarre customs associated with menstruation. These works thus refer to menstruation in a ‘special’ manner. Some of the works even reinforce menstrual taboos and menstrual etiquette. Some of the poems on menstruation “talk about being untouchable” (27).

Thus, Mayer exposes how literature not only effaces menstruation but also reinforces and maintains the menstrual etiquette. Towards the end of the poem, she analyses how young girls are never allowed to announce their menarche openly or “mention or say blatantly” (35) about menstruation. But she refuses to agree to the menstrual etiquette and says, “I’d like to mention or say blatantly/ I got my period today/ Probably like nobody” (5- 7). She even decides to write a poem on her menstrual experiences as now- a- days, poems are being written on virtually everything that one sees around. Mayer is dejected as she realises that there are poems even on irrelevant topics like “flowers like the spotted touch- me- not” (32) or “hummingbirds” (33), while there are hardly a few poems on menstruation, an event of vital importance in the lives of more than half the population in the world.

Wanted: A Healthy Attitude towards Menstruation

“Feminism is about equality for women, nothing more, and nothing less” (Walter 41). Such an equality can only arise when women are understood and accepted as they are. This requires an acceptance of all the experiences which are unique to women such as menstruation.

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The idea that the very mention of menstruation in public or even in the private realm of the family seems disgusting and revolting to many highlights the fact that our society lacks a healthy attitude towards menstruation. Menstrual poems by poets like Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Ellen Bass, Leena Manimekhalai and others expose the politics of the stigma associated with menstruation and advocate a positive menstrual experience. These poems try to shake off the prejudices and taboos surrounding menstruation, thus contributing to female liberation. They give women an opportunity of “converting their physicality into both knowledge and power” (Rich 254).

Most people believe that the society has got over menstrual taboos. But the truth is that we have simply made a journey from menstrual taboos to menstrual etiquette. Thus, modernity has not created a sexually egalitarian society but has only heralded in a culture of menstrual etiquette. Menstrual etiquette clearly revolves around the idea of menstruation as shameful and hence best concealed from view. The shame and stigma associated with menstruation is thus the underlying reason for the existence of such constraints. It is alright as long as whether or not to follow the menstrual etiquette is clearly a matter of choice, but when the adherence to menstrual etiquette becomes an obligation, it becomes rather suffocating and unhealthy. Hence, it is high time that the society embarks on a journey from menstrual etiquette to a complete acceptance of menstruation as it is.

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