



Re-spacing Menstrual Discourse: Visualizing Menstrual Oppression in West Bengal through the lens of Gender Theory

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Article Info

Article History:

Published: 18 August 2026

Publication Issue:

Volume 3, Issue 8
August-2026

Page Number:

375-383

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Abstract:

Social presentations of ‘selective’ bodies undergo scrutinization of the untouched dichotomic power-play- “pure/impure”; here, this ‘norm’ of impurity on certain anatomical functions of particular selective bodies is an area of discussion, and from an intersectional dimension. The coinage of the term Intersectionality was done by Kimberle Crenshaw, with her interview with the TIMES in 1989, where she asserts Intersectionality as

...It’s not identity politics on steroids. It is not a mechanism to turn white men into the new pariahs. It’s a lens, a prism... We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts.

Women as a notion and definition has been ascertaining too many features which have also been fixed by the social norms; Judith Butler eventually takes this thread of describing what a “women” is-- “Women are the sex which is not “one”. Within... a phallogocentric language, women constitute the unrepresentable... women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity” (Butler, 13). Menstruation and menstrual discourse are interrelated yet separated by a few technical terminologies; however, the commonalities of them are the term ‘culture’ and ‘power-play, where menstruation becomes a device of oppressive narratives. Therefore, my paper’s main attempt will be to focus on menstrual marginalization operating in amalgamation with gender-power-dynamics, functioning within the culture of Bengal, based on a few interviews taken.

Keywords: Women, Menstruation, Culture, Gender, and Sexuality

1. Introduction- Gender-dynamics

Before getting to the topic of Menstruation, it is important to talk about the identity and body that social structures have associated and appreciated to accept and visualize permanently. Adhering to this, the first and the only category is a ‘woman’; now what is a woman? Who defines a woman? Is the identity of a woman performative or based on experiences? So, many questions source out of a few basic belief instincts like “natural” “truth” of a human’s identification. Prominently Mary McIntosh in her article “Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity” stated that “gender is performative”, so we should be drawing the identity of woman as nothing but a ‘set of archaic practiced rules and norms’ based on few specific anatomical parts that are existing indifference with certain ‘other’ forms of anatomies. Comprehending that we perform gender, which also means we have the freedom to choose which gender to perform irrespective of whatever sex and sexuality do we identify ourselves with. Now, when social structures identify ‘women with menstruation’ only then does it omit the very basic freedom of selecting or opting our

gender, for they have fixed a body with the ability to reproduce, and having a vagina and breasts “naturally” are the ones to be called as women. If this choice of what gender one is erased and said that if you are ‘born’ (not assigned) female at birth, then you “naturally” become a woman (without choice/with choice), and you are attracted towards a man (heterosexuality as the normative benchmark). Hence, in this procedure, the entire teleology of sex/gender/desire is “naturally built’ and “inherently linked”.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) criticizes this stream of understanding stating gender is indeed socially constructed (as Simone De Beauvoir said in *The Second Sex*) and so is sex and desire; it is not sex that leads to gender that leads to desire, but it is quite the opposite, where it is the desire of a ‘heterosexual procreative relationship’ that results in acceptance and creation of only two genders- woman and man, and finally that functions in assigning at birth only two kinds of sexes- female and male, while omitting the rest. Butler’s view cracked the beautifully constructed triadic structure of sex/gender/desire and resulting in the definition of woman as a word and performance. Thus, these structures stand as independently fluid domains, where you can choose to be anything irrespective of what you are assigned to. Therefore, whoever chooses to be a woman may or may not bleed, and whoever a woman is by birth also may or may not bleed. Hence, if we are to re-space menstrual discourse within gender power dynamics, then ‘menstruation must be based on experience and not simply biological and or social’.

Methodology

The methodology followed to write this chapter is deconstructive and ethnographical. Also, an empirical knowledge and method has been followed to look for links between/expressions of Bengali culture and production of bodies within this discourse under the lens of Gender and Cultural theory.

2. Literature Review

Sinu Joseph’s book *ṚTU Viḍyā - Ancient Science Behind Menstrual Practices* (2020), shows how menstruation studies in postcolonial contexts have begun to acknowledge the importance of including various indigenous knowledge systems Ṣaḍ-Darśana, Āyurved, Tantra, Cakra, Yōg, Āgama Śāstra, Jyotiṣa Śāstra (Joseph, 2020). With a sociological methodology, Joseph interviewed over 500+ people from South and North India for over five years, and analyzed their menstrual experiences and practices under Ayurvedic science. As a result, the book goes beyond just describing cultural practices and takes a deep dive into explaining the scientific and logical reasoning behind the origin of these practices, without much focus on ethnoscares and ideoscares flow of culture, rather just scientific reasoning of the practices behind Menstruation in relation to Ayurveda.

Menstruating bodies are, thus, objects and agents, where agency is at once the agency *of* the body as an independent actor that is not always or easily controlled and agency *over* the body (Fingerson 2006, 23). As “both the objects and subjects of their bodies, of menarche and menstruation” (Puri 1999, 43), menstruators are positioned betwixt and between the public and the private (Vora [Chapter 4]). Dr. Gunjan Shahi and Dr. Uma Singh in their work *Decoding Menstrual Taboos in India: Issues, Challenges and Solutions* (2020) interviewed 250+ women, and their analysis showed that undefined norms like menstruating women cannot touch plants, are not allowed to sleep on beds, are

isolated to different places, etcetera, leading to irregular poor health (Shahi and Singh, 2020) could be linked to socio-cultural position. Current critical menstruation studies shows considering cultural (cross-cultural) flows to draw the ideoscapes and ethnoscapas within menstrual culture, invigorating us to question why the cross-cultural study of Menstruation is so vital. There are abundant articles on menstrual hygiene and health, but only a handful on cultural domain. My research addresses this gap by focusing on the literary and cultural aspect of menstrual power-discourse within Indian communities of West Bengal and Assam.

Rita E. Montgomery in her article “A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and Related Social Variables” argue for the importance adding the ‘cross-cultural’ lens to analyze menstruation-“A third possible correlation with the status of women, is not represented by any cross-cultural index at present” (Montgomery, 11). Menstruation is a product of “politico-cultural connecting discourse” making menstrual oppression a stream of subjugation under parallaxes of gender where culture functions as an excuse with its dominant discourse and power-play, Starting from texts that have talked about menstrual practices in India since the ancient time, when it was called ‘ruthu’ until, treating menstrual hygiene in the field of medical researches many publications have been published that limit the discourse to medical and biomedical analysis. The absence of South Asian culture, cross-cultural or diasporic studies to examine menstrual culture and marginalization in this field of research continues to date. There are very few cross-cultural studies such as *The Sabarimala Confusion - Menstruation across Cultures: A Historical Perspective*, which engages in a cross-cultural examination of menstruation, within selective South Asian Cultures.

3. Menstrual Discourse and Types of Bodies

Threading and enjambling from our last ideation now we stand to talk on Menstruation and Menstrual discourse. "Taboo" is anything that is prohibited for reasons of morality or taste. In the cultural construction of West Bengal, menstruation is an immensely ‘silence’ discourse, not only it is treated as a ‘taboo’, but also it causes the body to be an ‘untouchable’ object of perception. Menstruation is still a "taboo" in India, especially as West Bengal is speculated through the prism of gender studies. Before we move on to menstruation, an introduction to the gender theory that I will be using here should be clear. Gender is a complex dimension that has been constructed as one of the main branches of oppression and subjugation by forcing bodies to get categorized within the binarized structural system of identification. Furthermore, within the marginalized area of Gender, menstruation acts as double oppression, and further intersectional experiences of class, caste, race, (dis)ability, education, religion, language, etcetera intersects to create multiple layers of oppression. Moreover, the concept of Gender can be comprehended if we consider Hélène Cixous's ideation in *Laugh of Medusa*, where she stated that the point of entrance for men and women is different, as the ‘symbolic order’ of the social structure is a ‘phallus’ and the others are victims of peripheral objectification.

Menstruation is a biological process involving periodical or monthly bleeding or discharge of blood from the vagina when the uterine wall breaks. Now, it is a very much anatomical process, which has no connection whatsoever with any social norms, so why is ‘Menstruation spaced as a form of Marginalization’? How did it then become a complex structure of hardship and ‘silenced discourse’? Body as a social phenomenon is controlled and segregated based on a few categories, which are socially constructed, culturally evaluated, and politically re-presented with certain fixed

designatory symbols- caste, class, (dis)ability, gender, sexuality, age, education, accent, geo-location, etcetera. As we move deeper into this complex regulatory system imposed by the state on its people (bodies), we can eventually perceive that the policy is practiced to maintain convenience of inheritance and power transfer, an easy way to schedule legal transmission of property and identity. Now, the question which arises is that why then menstruation is kept as an “impure”, “dirty” subject of presentation? While analyzing the bodies as subjects of social constructions, we also understood that bodies are thus classified based on stairs of boxes, and within here the power of uplifting a particular form of body and celebrating whatever that anatomy possess is sustained over suppressing a particular form of body and digressing whatever that anatomy possess. Hence, as the power structure goes and plays- the anatomy preferred is the male one while the one is disgusted and quite often understood as a lacking and weaker one is the female counterpart, omitting the possibilities of remaining other anatomies; therefore, whatever processes go on within the female cytology is a matter of repulsion, and must be discussed in ‘silence’, so whichever etiology identifies itself as a female one and or experiences the biological phenomenon of a female body must be addressed with subjugated form, and should always be conversed separately out of sight of general understandings. Hence, Menstruation is a topic of disgust because it is associated with the “inferior anatomy” (female) within the social structure. Furthermore, when intersectional categories are introduced such as a bisexual Dalit cis-woman experiencing menstruation, it illustrates the compound impact of layered structural oppression. Nivedita Menon discussed the possible treatment of what could have it been if cis-men who identifies themselves as heterosexual and are Brahmin experiences menstruation in her book *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), and she writes that maybe it would no longer be treated as a disability and restricted and regulated with so many cultural and social constraints. She also stated what Gloria Steinem wrote as a funny meditation on what could have happened if men experienced menstruation, then that “would become enviable, boast-worthy masculine event. Men would brag about how long and how much” (Steinem as cited in Menon, 76) – because everything men do is valued.

Menstruation and Idea of Oppression in West Bengal

Identities other than upper-caste heterosexual rich men are curbed and trapped, molested and diminished as a part of certain “natural” orders of creation and regulation, where the acceptable and practiced procedural presentation of how a woman's bodily identity, especially in the culture of West Bengal has become a complex and most digressive example for many situations, can be prominently reflected through their treatment during menstruation. Paradoxically, women are denied fundamental dignity in these spaces, reducing their identity and worth as human agency. Menstruation is the cyclical bleeding from the sexual organs that are mainly found in human bodies, commonly referred to as "female" bodies. Taking into account the “connection theory” of our society, the menstruation then present in the divine bodies of women creates for them a notable name “untouchable for 5 days”. In Bengal it is the ‘silence’ which prevails during these five days, old people who ask the girl to stay away from men, not to touch or sit in places used by others, should wash their hair (because the rules are dirty and unclean), cannot enter the temples, must wash used and unused sheets, cannot talk to men about it! Menstruation, rather than being seen only as a

biological process, has been linked to culture, which has only led to women's already marginalized state converted into doubly or multiple oppressed identities!

Culture is a complex social tool that devices itself to operate as a state's power on the social norms and regulations in a pattern of superior and inferior structure, maintaining the binarized dimension of explaining the identities and bodies causing discernment and disillusion for few focused knowledge. Cultural presentation of women as 'political subjects' are often dismissed and under presented, so that, voices are subjugated automatically, which further dices the identity of women into a complex fabricated network of tension that portrays incomplete and inaccurate female characters; often compressing the requirement of 'bodies' defined as 'woman' to explore the answer to the question 'Who I am?' If evaluated these restrictive regimes, we can broadly address the menstrual functioning and discourse controlled under Patriarchal conceptions of operating bodies that act as a mutating drug resisting virus; however, to which Feminism functions as an antidote resulting in many reclaiming of spaces and identities while experiencing menstruation.

Working on the West Bengal cultural patterns menstruating bodies are not allowed to enter temples, as they are considered as 'pure' forms and spaces of worshipping and menstruation is not a pure process, even though all the Hindu Goddesses menstruates and that day in Bengali calendar is observed as Ambubachi. Applying the reverse power discourse by Michel Foucault, menstruating bodies instead of accepting that they are suffering from something so ignoble rather reverse the flow of power from negative to positive by functioning everything that a menstrual body is not allowed to perform- let's take a few examples from West Bengal, where a woman performed ritual of Saraswati Puja while menstruating and the image was shared in Times paper, images of Durga bleeding during Durga Puja where Mr. Mitra's artwork is that of a sanitary pad which has a bloodied lotus on it. Around it is a "*chalchitro*", a decorative piece that adorns Goddess Durga in the background. However complaints and threats were given to him, but he was happy for the support he received and did not bother about the restrictive mindset. While providing the outline, I would therefore draw three interviews (taken via g-meet) based on a questionnaire, which I prepared while researching on this topic from eight different individuals who experienced the culture of West Bengal, but I will present three interviews (the answers here are exactly what they said, but on request, their names are not mentioned here; however, I am just providing few important questions from the entire questionnaire)—

Questions

1. What is menstruation? What is your understanding of it?
2. Is menstruation just a biological or cultural phenomenon?
3. How does it link with gender marginalization?
4. Is menstruation to be discussed in silence?
5. How is your experience of these five days?
6. Do you think the 'black plastic' used to wrap the sanitary napkins is necessary?
7. Should menstrual hygiene be taught to students from school days?
8. Are 'men' particularly to be involved in menstrual discussions; figures like- father, senior citizens?

9. What are the 'cultural practices' you have faced being in West Bengal? How does it run parallel yet different from other cultures?
10. Should sanitary napkins be given at free cost?

Answers

Interviewee 1- upper-middle-class Professor, cis-women

1. Menstruation is the discharge of blood from 'vagina', which is often regarded as a "dirty" anatomical part. My understanding of 'menstruation' is similar to this definition, but it is not restricted to the same; I feel menstruation is an experience, more appropriately, which is treated as a 'taboo' in our society popularly.
2. Menstruation is both a cultural and biological phenomenon, where biology is cultured to convert it into destiny. Firstly, menstruation is a biological pattern that permits the body of a woman to give birth to; however, this entire process is either turned into an issue and oppression by putting it under a binarized structure of either divinity or dirtiness; either one is pure or impure. Just because 'a body' is always under a lens anything going on as a biological process eventually becomes a cultural product.
3. It not only links, it is a device to marginalize a particular gender who has been "naturally" associated with this process, others are marginalized if they want to experience the same but are not "naturally related". It is used as a tool because it occurs within the body that is treated as an 'object'.
4. The 'silence discourse' has been a favorite paper for the patriarchal; this serves as an advantage to veil each and everything they do not like "hearing". So, yes, of course, I think menstruation is compelled into a silent procedure, separated because they are women's business, and no, because I think menstruation should be a chapter in the syllabus of a student, not only discussion, education is a mandate here.
5. I experience getting fatigued a lot; moreover, cramps just get into my nerves, mood swings are common.
6. Well, I never experienced so, as mostly I order online; yet, this 'black plastic' in my case was once replaced by newspaper wraps. I felt as if I am buying something 'illicit', I immediately asked to 'un-wrap' the same, and their face was worth the price., as I said in one of the previous answers, menstruation must be taught in schools as a subject of awareness. Half of the population is 'unaware' of the same. This causes immense health problems for girls, using appropriate sanitary napkins, understanding the anatomical flow during menstruation are important not only for girls but for boys too- men too suffer from menopause.
7. While senior citizens may hold traditional views, fathers must be actively involved in menstrual discourses with their daughters along with a cup of coffee. They must know if needed, there's nothing to hide. Moreover, daughters only having fathers should always express to their fathers about the same.
8. I have not much idea about other states, except that Assam celebrates it (although I find it quite critical), but I have been advised not to touch 'tulsi' tree, or to enter temples or any "pure" places; I was also asked to shampoo my hairs as that cleans off the 'dirt'; furthermore, sheets, clothes and all were washed.
9. Absolutely, I think this step must be taken, as that save thousands of rural lives from getting destroyed or exposed to critical health perils.

Interviewee 2- student, working, belongs from Assam and West Bengal, middle-class, cis-woman.

1. It is a 28-day natural cycle (fertility process) in a female body that allows women to perform motherhood.
It is considered taboo because young people do not have access to education in this matter; the women were behind the tents and were fed and learned to be imprisoned in their homes. And the patriarchal society which was unaware of the knowledge of human anatomy interpreted it as impure, considering it a taboo.
2. It is a biological process that has cultural intonation. For me, it is only an anatomical phenomenon, and we have to combat cultural hypocrisy.
3. Gender marginalization is the oppression of one gender. In this case, 'women' are oppressed just because they experience menstruation; I do not find any logic in it. Why is it so 'wrong' with menstruation?
4. No, I have the privilege of discussing it with my parents, but I know many do not, because of how the patriarchal society has framed it- anything related to the 'body' of women must be dealt with in silence. I feel menstruation must be a debate topic too.
5. I experience a lot of menstrual cramps; I feel hungry a lot, and angry too.
6. Yes, every time I go to the shop near my locality it is using this 'black plastic' to wrap the pads, and even asks me not to tell loudly the names like Whisper or Stayfree, etcetera. This reflects a widespread socio-cultural hesitation surrounding menstrual products.
7. Yes, from my school experience, I think it is mandatory. Every school must teach about menstruation, what it is, and how hygienic maintenance can be done.
8. Yes, I talk to my father about it; my father and mother both are comfortable about the same. It is important to involve father figures to break certain barriers.
9. In West Bengal, I have been asked to shampoo, not to enter temples; however, in Assam, there is a celebration of Menstruation, named "Tuloni Biya" or "Xoru Biye". This, more than a celebration is to make society aware that the daughter is now worth 'reproducing'. All the cultures are the same, some celebrate and oppress, while some directly do the same.
10. Yes, it must, particularly to people who cannot afford it. Moreover, women from rural areas must be given this free of cost, so that, they stop using unhygienic clothes resulting in deaths.

Interviewee 3- middle-class male, a college student, cis-man

1. I think it happens in females...like in...there is blood coming out from the vagina, and pain is there, for this the girls can conceive. My idea is the same only, nothing different.
2. Well, since I have not experienced it, regarding cultural phenomena I might have no idea, but yes, it is absolutely a biological process, but restricted to women only, I guess.
3. Gender marginalization...well, I think maybe yes, I had a girlfriend (right now not there), who often said during her periods, I cannot touch this/that. Maybe, women are restricted from doing a few things, don't know.
4. No, I guess 'silence' has created all problems, if there is a problem, I think women should speak up.

5. No experience...
6. No idea, never went to buy one
7. Yes, see knowledge on anything is important for better comprehension of us, so I guess menstrual hygiene, just like sex education is crucial for Indian students to learn.
8. Yes, why should not daughters speak to their fathers about it? I do not find any reason, well cannot detail much as I have no idea of the same.
9. The interviewee expressed a lack of awareness regarding specific cultural practices in West Bengal.
10. Yes, to the poor lot specifically.

4. Conclusion-Evaluation of the Interviews

I have taken nearly eight interviews, and a few others were not comfortable talking to; however, I could only list three out of them. Nevertheless, the answers received were more or less similar yet distinct from each other, as these above interviews state. But what was very common from their perspectives was that 'menstruation' as a topic of discourse is almost an 'absence', but being absent it is still present (now the flux of absent/present is well explained by Derrida), but a sense of ignorance was there in the male interviewee (which I expected). These interviews stated clearly how menstruation is restricted within a 'cramped' space, and how much we need to shift its paradigm to a safe space of discursive play. It is crucial to understand that menstrual narratives are molded culturally, and to re-space the same we need to have 'reverse discourse' of this power and not 'silence'.

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