



## **Crimson Realities: Navigating the Body Politics in *Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia***

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### **Abstract**

Menstruation, an intrinsically biological phenomenon, is frequently considered negatively by society. It stems from global myths, superstitions, and taboos. Farah Ahamed, a human rights lawyer and activist, effectively collated the varied menstrual experiences in her anthology "Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia." The anthology includes poetry, interviews, artwork, and other works by diverse writers, sheds light on the stigma associated with periods, and the challenges women face from menstruation. This paper focuses on the theory of the techniques used by patriarchal societies to manage the human body, particularly that of women. It examines the experiences of numerous menstruators in the book "Period Matters" through a body politics lens. The study also tries to document the reality in which men objectify and control the female body. Furthermore, it investigates how numerous women have embarked on a quest to dispel stereotypes about menstruation.

**Keywords:** Menstruation, Women, Body Politics, South Asia, Objectification, Stereotypes

### **Introduction**

The phrase 'body politics' gained a lot of traction in the latter part of the 20th century, specifically in the 1970s during the second wave of the feminist movement in the United States. The phrase alludes to the methods and laws that social authorities use to govern the human body as well as the conflict regarding the extent of personal and

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societal bodily control. This rule is the result of numerous authorities. Nadia Brown, an American political scientist, asserts in one of her articles that bodies become venues where social constructs of difference are imposed on humans. These power structures establish the structuralist concept of binary opposition by placing the body in hierarchised dichotomies, such as masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual, pure/impure, and able-bodied/disabled, where one is always considered dominant or superior and the other inferior.

The creation of power structures in society places the male body at the top of the hierarchy. This inevitably places all other groups of people, particularly women, under them. If we connect this structure to menstruation, we see the non-menstrual male body on the pedestal, reinforcing the belief that all menstruating bodies are feminine and impure. Such a classification impacts not only women but also the queer menstruation population, which does not identify as women or does not fit within society's gender boundaries. Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* sums up this struggle when she says:

I know of no woman—virgin, mother, lesbian, married, celibate—whether she earns her keep as a housewife, a cocktail waitress, or a scanner of brain waves—for whom her body is not a fundamental problem: its clouded meaning, its fertility, its desire, its so-called frigidity, its bloody speech, its silences, its changes and mutilations, its rapes and ripening.  
(Rich 284)

Cutcha Risling Baldy, an associate professor of Native American studies who studies Indigenous feminisms, has observed that the menstrual taboo' in the colonies, particularly in the Northern Hemisphere, was part of a larger "politics of taboo" created by Western scholars to normalise Western patriarchy by labelling women and their bodies as taboo. Menstruation has always been linked to body politics for power – a societal power that exclusively accommodates the qualities and wants of male, heterosexual bodies from dominant racial and ethnic groupings. Society excludes and marginalises everything that comes under this category. Body politics

entailed fighting against the commodification of the female body and, more crucially, advocating for women's reproductive rights. 'The personal is the political' became the term that expressed the feeling of how winning domestic rights, or rights within one's home, as well as rights over one's own body, was critical to gaining equal rights in the public arena. It also highlighted a woman's strength and control over her own body. A woman's figure was supposed to appear 'feminine' as opposed to 'masculine.' She was expected to be fair and attractive to males, to apply makeup, to keep their body hair clipped, and to always dress in body-fitting and revealing clothing. The feminist practices of rejecting makeup, not shaving body hair, especially on the legs and underarms, and even dressing in loose, comfortable clothing were some of the first attempts to challenge such social constructs about what a woman's body should look like.

Katyayni Sharma, a writer, describes militant feminists who have painted with their menstrual blood. Vanessa Tiegs, an American artist, and Petra Paul, a German artist, have had a distinctive impact in both the creative and feminist realms with their menstrual blood paintings. Their paintings are distinguished by elaborate patterns of crimson swirls on white backgrounds, replete with feathered brush strokes. Jen Lewis is another well-known name in menstruation design, with her 'Beauty in Blood' collection. She argues that her 'bioartography' project aims to challenge social taboos around menstruation and the female body through macrophotography of menstrual fluid. She challenges the concept that menstruation is 'gross,' 'vulgar,' or 'unrefined' by sharing candid, real-life images of her monthly blood, forcing people to see and think about menstruation in a completely new light. She says that when blood joins water, an abstract artistic aspect emerges that deserves more examination not only by women but also by society as a whole. While a few brave enthusiasts have commended the creativity and coarse depiction of these paintings, the vast majority of people have voiced outrage and revulsion at this visual display of bodily art. Many of them have referred to them as 'tasteless excuses for artwork' and medical biohazards. Such negative responses raise important issues about why menstrual blood elicits such strong social evaluations rooted in aversion, disgust, and terror. "Please excuse Farah from swimming today, as she has female problems" (5), said

Farah's mother to her swimming coach and he decided to send her to a tree to sit by herself. Although it was Farah's body, other people made decisions about it. Although Farah's body belonged to her, other people made decisions about it. Farah Ahamed recalls this early event in the preface of her outstanding book "Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia," released in 2022. This anthology uses a variety of literary and artistic genres to highlight the differences and similarities between the menstrual experience. The book covers a wide spectrum of viewpoints, including those of academics, politicians, artists and entrepreneurs, as well as the voices of the underprivileged, such as the homeless, transgender people, and inmates. It focuses on the experiences of menstruation in South Asia. Ahamed finds no time experience too insignificant, whether it is in the harsh landscapes of Pakistan's Baluchistan, at nunneries in Bhutan, or in years of Taliban rule in Afghanistan or corporate headquarters in Bangladesh. Menstruators share a sense of empathy and kinship, permeating every perspective. A thorough reading of the book sheds light on the power dynamics that underlie menstruation in various South Asian societies.

Tishani Doshi's poem "I Carry My Uterus in a Small Suitcase" opens the collection. Her poem "Advice for Pliny the Elder, Big Daddy of Mansplainers" is included in the book as well. As shape poems—the former in the shape of a vagina, the latter in the shape of a menstruation cup—the poems are self-explanatory. The second poem is a humorous yet biting critique of the ancient Roman physician Pliny the Elder's depiction of menstruation, while the first verse deals with the hysteria of menstruation. He makes such ridiculous and nonsensical remarks about the catastrophic power of menstruation in his encyclopaedic-style opus "Natural History," remarks that were accepted as fact for many centuries. According to him, women who are menstruating sometimes perceive a detachment from reality and socially acceptable behaviour. Additionally, he asserted that a menstruating woman is perceived by men as less feminine. He went on to say that they destroy entire crop fields and vegetation, drive bees from their hives, and force caterpillars, worms, beetles, and other rodents to fall to the ground. Doshi's technique of drawing comparisons to Pliny the Elder and then recasting him as the "Big Daddy of Mansplainers" is a clever way to highlight how men

perceived women who were menstruating, preventing them from going about their daily lives and painting them as wicked witches who could destroy everything with their blood and bare touch. While Victoria Patrick sheds light on the struggles encountered by women during the horrific days of Partition,

The realities of Patrick's poetry are reaffirmed by the discussions Farah Ahamed conducts with these ladies in Pakistan. While older women who have gone through menopause assert that they are unrestricted and hygienic, younger generations of girls and women continue to be victims of the same. They continue to utilise ash bricks for absorption and rags made from old cloth that are frequently wet in the winter. The girls she spoke with were unable to discuss their living situations honestly since they were under the men's authority and were terrified of them. The females tell Ahamed that they have never experienced any constraints regarding their menstrual cycle, demonstrating the influence that culture has on an individual's perception of their own body. Since their bodies are unholy and shrines are holy, they find it perfectly normal and fail to see the political ramifications of forbidding them from entering places of worship when they are bleeding. Amina, a young gypsy woman, was similarly misled into thinking that her body was cursed. She was shunned by a society that believed that women should only be responsible for bearing children because she was unable to conceive after two years of marriage. She had little concern for diseases, hygiene, or blood. Her greatest worry is that her spouse will desert her in favour of a woman who can conceive. Amina's story is a prime illustration of a patriarchal society in which women are constantly blamed for their inability to conceive, rather than men.

“What If,” the final poem in the book, was written by the editor. According to Farah Ahamed, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s poem “What If You Slept” inspired her own poetry. Ahamed’s poetry is a dramatic contrast to the latter, which is a dream poem in which the sleeper believes herself in heaven where she chooses a strange and lovely flower, and upon waking finds the flower in her hand. Ahamed's poem describes the living nightmare of a poor sweeper lady. In her hand, she finds a broom instead of a flower. She got the idea when reading an article in the anthology by Ayra Indrias Patras

regarding the working conditions of Christian women sweepers in Lahore. In the poem, Ahamed muses on the miserable living and working circumstances faced by the Christian women sweepers. The poem tackles the issue of menstruation that they deal with at home and work by posing several rhetorical questions. There is no shortage of circumstances in which a woman feels that her employers, moms, or spouses are exerting external control over her. Due to both gender and caste discrimination, the misery of menarche is doubled for these sanitation workers in Lahore. When a girl talks about her concerns of bleeding to her mother, she is advised to use rags and avoid touching 'this food', taking a bath, talking to friends especially boys. As soon as a girl gets her menarche she is married off, where also things aren't different. The poet very clearly depicts the attitude to and the power men exercise on menstruation when she says, "He said, be grateful for what you have/ And when you complained to your boss, and asked for a female toilet/ He said, sleep with me here and now, and I'll make it better for you later" (54). The men see women only as objects for their own pleasure; women can survive only as long as they conform to the desires, rules and regulations set by men.

In her discussion of male fiction writers, Farah Ahamed provides examples of how these authors have suggested that there is a physical or mental issue with their female characters. She quotes, for example, a passage from Milan Kundera's book "The Unbearable Lightness of Being." His main character Tereza's outrage and hatred against her mother for not having the dignity to cover them up when she discovers that her sanitary napkins are stained with blood are similar to a man's feelings in the same situation. When Tereza remarks on a dog's menstruation, the author-narrator conveys his opinion that women are repulsive, wicked, and inferior to dogs. Dogs are never banished from Paradise, so although her dog's period makes her feel light-hearted, hers makes her uneasy. Additionally, there are other literary works where menstrual blood is sexualised, such as the cases of boys who taste the blood and find it attractive because blood is dripping down her thighs. These examples show that either menstruation bleeding is socially taboo or occurs only to satisfy a male character's need for sensuality. The short novella "Behind the Braided Coconut Leaves" by K. Madavan subverts such masculine-

centric ideas about menstruation. Siba Barkataki translated the work from its original French to English. The novella, which is set in Pondicherry, narrates the innocent tale of Guna, a little child, and his thoughts and uncertainties when his sister begins to menstruate. Guna is raised in the customs and culture of a regular Indian family. As a result, everything in his interpretation of the phenomena stems from local mythology and beliefs.

So far, the topics of discussion have only touched on a few of the typical issues that most people who menstruate encounter. Instead of stopping there, though, Farah goes on to write chapters about the experiences of the imprisoned, the crippled, and the transgender community. The chapter “A Caregiver's Perspective on Menstrual Hygiene” painstakingly describes a mother's concern in raising her mentally challenged daughter and shielding her from the ugly and greedy gaze in society. To gain greater insight into the menstrual management strategies of mothers with challenged children, Ayra Indrias speaks with Fazilat, Soraiya, and Shariffa. While managing one's period is easy for a normal woman, it can be quite challenging for someone like Reshma, who has no understanding why she bleeds every month or how it relates to pregnancy. All she knows is that it's embarrassing to discuss with others but there's nothing to be afraid of. The moms are left to shoulder the duty of periodically cleansing their children's body and inspecting their clothing. people living with disability in Pakistan are largely isolated and relegated to the shadows because of the associated stigma. The government is also not proactive with legislation to promote the needs and rights of those with disabilities.

There has been a major uprising against the menstrual politics of power in recent times. Women started battling against the existing power systems and claiming their menstrual power everywhere. As always, the best medium for spreading this self-statement was art. According to Farah Ahamed, her intention in incorporating the art was to demonstrate how menstrual art, or menstrala, was being utilised for menstrual activism. The book's front cover page features a quote from Lyla Freechild's “Aadya Shakti,” also known as “Primal Energy.” She radically created art by using her own menstrual blood to create the artwork. Dancer and political activist

Amna Mawaz Khan explains her concept for a menstrual dance called "Raqs-e-Mahvaari." For her, the dance serves as a means of both self-expression and self-discovery. Furthermore, women's dance is a long-standing custom in South Asia that is nearly as ancient as menstruation. The dance is inspired by the moon cycle's symbolic meaning, which is linked to the menstrual cycle. To further emphasise her maternity bond, she dressed like her mother. Her dance challenges societal norms by painting her feet in red, a colour typically connected to menstruation and frequently seen as a sign of humiliation and embarrassment.

Working with the Santal tribe in Jharkhand exposed Srilekha Chakraborty to a tribe enmeshed in antiquated practices and rituals. She suggests installing wall murals as a way to alter the way people view the different eras in the area. In one artwork, a female is depicted wind surfing on a pad and floating along a river of menstrual blood with assurance. The message of the paintings is that a woman's menstruation is a sign of her strength rather than a problem. Comic books are the ideal medium for teaching children about the world. Literature is another means of reaching a large audience. "Menstrupedia," a comic book written by Aditi Gupta, explains menstruation in an entertaining and educational way for young readers. The far-reaching outcome of the book was that it made the subject of periods 'cool' and it has been used to educate more than 13 million children. In addition to art, Farah also discusses certain governmental policies and innovations that have helped overcome period poverty as well as help women break the chains associated with menstruation. For instance, Shashi Tharoor discusses his Menstrual Rights Bill which he introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2018. The Bill seeks to establish legally protected menstrual rights for girls and women in an unprecedented way. Though there have been debates regarding it even amongst women, the policy for menstrual leave is also instrumental in fighting the stigma around menstruation. By institutionalising paid period leave we can realise one of the current feminist goals of an unbiased and accessible workplace. Menstrual workshops can go a long way in informing and educating the poor and the uninformed about the phenomenon of menstruation as well as make them aware of how institutionalised hierarchies exercise power on their bodies. One such workshop was held in

Balochistan, where there exists a highly patriarchal system of governance, by Granaz Baloch which was the first of its kind. It helped her defy the traditional notions of tribal honour or 'Baloch mayar.' The workshop offered a safe space for the participants to learn, discuss, and share.

Apart from art, Farah talks about other government initiatives and policies that have assisted in eradicating period poverty and assisting women in escaping the constraints imposed by their menstrual cycles. Shashi Tharoor, for example, talks about the Menstrual Rights Bill that he introduced in the Lok Sabha in 2018. Through the Bill, women and girls will have menstruation rights that are guaranteed by law in a level never seen before. The menstrual leave policy is crucial in combating the stigma associated with menstruation, despite discussions about it even occurring among women. We can actually achieve one of the current feminist objectives of an impartial and accessible workplace by institutionalising paid time off. In addition to supplying reusable pads made from repurposed cotton and distributing undergarments, they also have increased women's self-confidence and dignity and made them self-reliant. As the saying goes, modern times require modern solutions. In this fast-moving technological world, digital technologies are instrumental in providing solutions to the shame of menstruation. Women are drawn to period-tracking apps to keep track of their periods, PMS, and other related subjects. It helps women in a greater self-understanding and produces spaces that are supposedly liberating, educational, and private. However, privacy cannot be guaranteed because the information that we enter on the app is often leaked to third-party apps. Thus, on the web, a woman's body data becomes everybody's data. Period matters are structured in such a manner that it ends with an experience of menopause. In the final chapter, Lisa Ray talks about how she managed her early chemo-induced menopause. She asserts that the end of fertility is not the decline of a woman- instead it is a passage to stature and empowerment. Thus, Farah Ahamed is successful in describing every aspect of menstruation- the biology behind it, the taboos, traditions, and stigma associated with it, the exercise of power on menstruating bodies by the patriarchal society, and even the activities

and methods of challenging those power structures in her book *Period Matters*.

As stated by feminists all over the world, the time has come now to stand up and speak out on behalf of menstruation. We need to accept that it is a natural, messy but beautiful part of life, and just because it is not a shared experience doesn't mean it needs to be a divisive topic that aids gender inequity. It is in this light that the slogans of 'Personal is Political' echoed all over the world; to make people realise that the seemingly personal issues related to the body were affixing their position in the political discourses. The patriarchal society has been exercising their control over the woman's body ideologically and tactically through the establishment of tacit as well as implicit norms and customs since time immemorial. Eventually, the term body politics has been adopted by the feminist and queer discourse to signify the politicisation and emergence of seemingly personal body issues- including pregnancy, contraception, and menstruation- into the public discourses.

*Period Matters: Menstruation in South Asia* has been rightly composed and published by Farah Ahamed at such a time when the discourses surrounding menstruation are out in the open. She has done a remarkable job in bringing together a whole range of experiences within one single book. It's not just women who express their concerns, even the queer community find their voice in the war cry 'Not all women menstruate, and not all who menstruate are women.' Similarly, she has included every menstrual experience, both oppressive and radical, traditional and progressive and even discusses the necessity of menstrual dignity, or the dignity of the 'self.' She interviews not only the established business class, but also the labour class, including the sanitation workers, and the homeless. Each of these experiences are relevant in understanding the politics of menstruation.

The reality of how the society tends to control or even disregard anything associated with women is exceptionally portrayed in Gloria Steinem's very famous satirical essay "If Men Could Menstruate: A Political Fantasy." In such a world where men menstruated instead of women, menstruation would become an enviable, worthy

masculine event. The topic would never be one discussed in whispers, but something that would be openly acknowledged, nurtured and celebrated; it would be something that men would brag about. But like she says, it will only happen if we let it be. Reclaiming menstruation is essential if we are to overthrow the politics of it. Hence, as Farah Ahamed observes, there is a long way to go in removing the stigma from menstruation and normalising it. Meanwhile, the menstruators must ensure that they embrace the femininity of it, respect it and honour their cycles because, menstrual blood is not one that alienates us, but one that reinforces our connection with our Mother Earth.

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