



Beyond the Period Hut: A Theoretical Reflection of Menstrual Seclusion and Gender Inequality in Gaokor: A Period House

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Abstract

The short film *Gaokor: A Period House* (2018), set in a rural village in Maharashtra, depicts the sufferings of menstruating women in small, isolated huts implicating their physical separation, restricted mobility and social exclusion. These visual narratives reveal how menstruation is culturally constructed as a matter of impurity, reinforcing silence and shame around women's bodies. Using Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, the *Gaokor* can be understood as the true reflection of menstruation where social norms regulate women's bodies through internalised control and community surveillance. Goffman's theory of stigma explores how these practices present menstruating women as socially "other", creating psychological distress, frustrations and reinforcing gendered understandings. The film demonstrates the intersection of power, stigma and health; isolation in *Gaokor* forces women to stay in unhygienic conditions, emotional stress and limited participation in public life. Analysed from the perspectives of community health, *Gaokor* illustrates how socio-cultural norms operate as structural determinants of health, shaping women's lived experiences and access to well-being. This theoretical analysis underscores that menstrual seclusion is not merely a tradition, but a manifestation of power and stigma.

Keywords: Disciplinary Power, *Gaokor*, Gender Inequality, Menstrual Seclusion, Stigma Theory, Women's Health

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Introduction

Although menstruation is a natural biological process, it is heavily regulated and stigmatised in many parts of India, where cultural norms continue to shape how menstruating bodies are controlled and monitored. The short film *Gaokor: A Period House* (2018), set in rural Maharashtra, visualises menstruating women being confined to small, isolated huts, excluded from kitchens, temples, and public spaces, and often made to sleep on bare floors, reflecting deep-rooted beliefs that construct menstruation as impure. This is visually evident in the scene where a young girl, at the onset of menstruation, is quietly instructed to leave the household and move towards the Gaokor without protest. The absence of dialogue in this moment proves how seclusion is normalised and internalised in our everyday life. Such spatial and social segregation exemplifies how menstrual stigma is embedded in everyday life, legitimising cultural practices that restrict mobility and regulate women's bodies. From a post-structuralist perspective, Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power provides an analytical foundation for understanding how such practices function as mechanisms of bodily regulation (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 137–38). Power, in this sense, operates not only through formal institutions but through subtle, internalised norms that shape behaviour. In *Gaokor*, the logic of seclusion becomes a disciplinary practice where women internalise expectations of withdrawal, and their movements are monitored by family and community members (Bobel 281). For instance, the girl's silent acceptance and immediate withdrawal from domestic space demonstrate how control operates through internalised expectations rather than coercion. Her actions reflect what Foucault describes as the production of "docile bodies," where individuals regulate themselves in anticipation of social judgement (*Discipline and Punish* 93). The hut, thus, becomes a micro-site of power where docile bodies are produced through culturally sanctioned surveillance. Simultaneously, Goffman's

theory of stigma explains the psychosocial consequences of menstrual seclusion (Goffman 3). Women confined to Gaokor are socially “othered,” marked as impure, and excluded from communal life, resulting in shame, emotional distress, and diminished social identity. This is further illustrated in scenes where food is provided separately to the menstruating woman, often without direct contact, reinforcing her temporary status as “impure.” Such practices transform menstruation into a socially discrediting condition, aligning with Goffman’s understanding of stigma (Goffman 3). This stigma is not an isolated experience but a social process maintained through collective reinforcement of menstrual taboos (Hennegan et al.7).

Cinematic representations also play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of menstruation. Scholars argue that film and media often reproduce cultural anxieties around menstruation, reinforcing silence, stigma, and bodily regulation (Rosewarne, ch.1; Kissling 5-12). Gaokor becomes part of this cinematic lineage, visually capturing how spatial confinement and social exclusion intersect with gendered norms. Integrating these frameworks within the Social Determinants of Health model of the World Health Organisation highlights how menstrual seclusion affects both physical and mental well-being. Exposure to unhygienic conditions, lack of rest, restricted diet, social isolation, and psychological stress all emerge as direct consequences of stigma-driven practices (Sumpter and Torondel 8). The film shows these conditions through the visual portrayal of women resting on bare floors inside the Gaokor, without adequate bedding or sanitation, highlighting the material consequences of culturally sanctioned isolation. These practices further reinforce gendered inequalities by limiting access to education, labour, and community participation. Understanding menstrual seclusion through these theoretical, sociocultural, and cinematic lenses highlights the need for interventions that address not only hygiene-related challenges but also the broader cultural, structural, and symbolic forces that shape menstrual

experiences. Promoting gender equality must therefore involve dismantling the disciplinary and stigmatising practices that undermine women's dignity, agency, and overall well-being.

The main objective of this paper is to critically examine how menstrual seclusion practices depicted in the short film *Gaokor: A Period House* function as mechanisms of disciplinary power and social stigma, and how these practices collectively shape women's physical, psychological and social well-being. This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach, using the short film *Gaokor* as a primary cultural text to explore the intersections of gender, health and stigma. This analysis is theoretical and discursive, seeking to interpret how menstrual seclusion is represented, normalised and internalised within the socio-cultural context depicted in the film.

Power, Stigma and the Regulation of the Menstruating Body: A Theoretical Analysis

The short film *Gaokor* unfolds as a stark representation of how menstrual seclusion continues to shape women's lived realities in many rural settings in India. Beyond a mere depiction of custom, the film exposes how menstruation is conceptualised as impure and how such impurity is systemically institutionalised through everyday spaces, attitudes, gestures and silences. The discussion interprets this practice through the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power and Goffman's stigma theory connecting both to the wider discourse of gendered inequality in health and social participation.

Foucault claims that modern societies operate through "micro-physics of power," where bodies are regulated not by overt coercion but by subtle systems of observation, normalisation, and internalisation (Discipline and Punish 26–27). The *Gaokor*—the hut where menstruating women are secluded acts as one such disciplinary space. It reflects what

Foucault calls a panoptic structure, where women are not directly forced but learn to regulate their own behaviour through the expectation of social scrutiny and moral judgement. The isolation of women during menstruation is presented as voluntary adherence to menstrual expectations, yet it reflects how power is embedded within social consent. The hut becomes both a symbol and a mechanism of control; it separates, classifies and contains. Women's bodies are considered as "polluting" and spatially excluded, reinforcing what Foucault described as the "docile body"—a body made compliant through repetition and moral obligation (*Discipline and Punish* 135–69). In this sense, menstrual seclusion in *Gaokor* functions as a disciplinary technology that reproduces gender hierarchy under the guise of cultural sacredness.

Goffman defined stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting," reducing individuals "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman 3). In the film, menstruation is constructed precisely as a temporary yet deeply stigmatised identity. The practice of isolating menstruating women transforms a natural biological process into a moral deviation, and the *Gaokor* becomes both the site and symbol of this practice. The women in the film do not resist seclusion but perform it as a social expectation. Their silence and compliance reveal what Goffman calls "normative adjustment to a spoiled identity" (Goffman 31). Shame becomes internalised; stigma is no longer an external mark but a psychological condition. Through the ritual of exclusion, menstruation becomes both invisible and hyper-visible; erased from conversation yet constantly marked through behavioural restrictions. This stigma is reinforced by community validation and expectation. Elders, often women themselves, act as custodians of purity codes, demonstrating how the cycle of exclusion is perpetuated by intergenerational socialisation. Thus, *Gaokor* illustrates Goffman's observation that stigma is "not a property of a person but a relationship between attribute and stereotype"—a cultural

construct that maintains social cohesion at the expense of individual dignity (Goffman 3).

The Gaokor is not only a social construct but also a determinant of health. Restricted access to sanitation, nutrition and safe shelter during seclusion creates tangible health risks, including infection, malnutrition and exposure to harsh conditions. Psychologically, isolation deepens feelings of inferiority and emotional distress, contributing to a sense of embodied shame and insult of womanhood. These health inequities are inseparable from the gendered power relations that sustain them. As Foucault suggests, power “produces domains of objects and rituals of truth” (*Discipline and Punish* 194). Menstruation, as seen in Gaokor, is rendered an object of impurity, and the truth of womanhood becomes defined through compliance with that belief. Health, therefore, cannot be addressed merely as a medical issue—it is connected to society and politics. Achieving well-being requires dismantling the structures of stigma and surveillance that control women’s bodies. The film’s silences, its minimal dialogue and intense focus on space and expression, function as what Foucault would term a “discursive silence” (*History of Sexuality* 27). This silence speaks of the power to define what can be said and what must remain unspoken. In community contexts, such silences reproduce ignorance and prevent health education from addressing menstruation openly. The near absence of open conversation about menstruation throughout the film reinforces this silence, where the subject remains unspoken yet strictly regulated within social practice.

Resistance, though subtle, is present in Gaokor through the visual language of discomfort, gaze and emotion. The film attracts the viewer to question the legitimacy of inherited norms. Subtle moments, such as hesitant movements, lowered gazes, or visible discomfort, suggest an underlying tension between compliance and personal experience, indicating that adherence

to the practice does not necessarily imply acceptance. According to Foucault, “where there is power, there is resistance,” and that resistance emerges from the margins of silence (*History of Sexuality* 95). Recognising menstrual seclusion as a public health concern rather than a cultural inevitability is an act of counter-discourse; an effort to reclaim menstruation as a dignified and natural experience. By reframing menstruation through the lens of health equity and human dignity, *Gaokor* contributes to the discourse of gender equality. It implicitly aligns with the vision of creating inclusive societies where gender does not determine access to safety, hygiene, or emotional well-being. Challenging menstrual stigma, therefore, is not merely about hygiene education—it is about transforming power relations and reconstituting womanhood beyond purity and pollution.

In essence, the *Gaokor* stands as both a literal structure and a metaphor for the architecture of gendered control. From a Foucauldian perspective, the *Gaokor* operates as a space of exercising disciplinary power. As Foucault asserts: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (*History of Sexuality* 93). The film shows women confined to small huts, separated from household and community spaces and constantly monitored by family and society. This spatial isolation exemplifies Foucault’s concept of micro-practices of power, where control is internalised, women regulate their own behaviour and movements in anticipation of social expectations. The *Gaokor*, hence, functions as a space of surveillance and self-discipline producing conformity to social norms around menstruation. Goffman’s theory of stigma further explores the psychosocial understanding of menstrual seclusion. He notes: “Stigma is an attribute that is deeply discrediting... reducing the bearer from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (Goffman 3).

From a community health perspective, these practices bring physical risks. Physical health is compromised through exposure to unhygienic conditions, malnutrition and deficient rest, while psychological health suffers through emotional stress and social isolation. Moreover, the intersection of disciplinary power and stigma perpetuates structural gender inequalities, limiting women's access to education, work and social engagement. By linking visual evidence from the short film to these theories, it is evident that Gaokor is not merely a cultural practice but a complex social institution where power and stigma intersect, shaping both bodily and social experiences. Understanding menstrual seclusion in this way emphasises the need for culturally sensitive interventions that address harmful traditions while promoting women's dignity, autonomy, worth, and health.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of *Gaokor: A Period House* reveals several interconnected forms of disciplinary power, social stigma, and gendered exclusion that regulate menstruating women's lives. The spatial isolation imposed through the Gaokor operates as a disciplinary mechanism that normalises women's bodily regulation. Women internalise expectations of withdrawal and purity, demonstrating the micro-practices of surveillance that Foucault describes as essential to producing compliant bodies. The hut's spatial separation—from household activities, food preparation, religious spaces, and social interaction—functions as an everyday technology of power. This is evident in the film when the girl is physically separated from the household and directed toward the isolated hut, reinforcing how spatial segregation is normalised within everyday practice.

The findings show that social labelling plays a crucial role in sustaining menstrual stigma. Women confined to the Gaokor are repeatedly marked as “impure,” reducing their social identity and reinforcing emotional distress. This reflects Goffman's

argument that stigma transforms a natural attribute into a socially discrediting condition. Shame, embarrassment, and silence become internalised, sustaining cultural myths surrounding menstruation. The visual depiction of separate food arrangements and lack of physical interaction further emphasises how this conception of impurity is enacted in daily life. It also reveals that power and stigma intersect to produce significant health impacts. Restrictions on diet, mobility, and hygiene expose women to physical risk, while psychological effects such as anxiety, loneliness, and diminished self-worth become visible in their lived experiences. These health risks align with global research demonstrating that menstrual stigma undermines well-being, educational continuity, and social participation.

The film demonstrates how menstrual seclusion diminishes agency. The practice restricts participation in decision-making, community events, and labour, reinforcing structural gender inequities that frame women as subordinate to cultural doctrines of purity. The Gaokor, therefore, operates as both a literal and metaphorical structure of gendered control. The findings highlight the urgency of culturally sensitive community health interventions. Challenging menstrual seclusion requires dialogic engagement with communities, health workers, and educators, along with efforts to dismantle silence and misinformation. The film creates an opening for counter-discourse by visually exposing restrictive norms and encouraging viewers to critically evaluate the cultural logic that underpins menstrual seclusion.

The discussion on Gaokor: A Period House can be organised under following interconnected thematic dimensions that reveal how menstrual seclusion operates as a system of disciplinary power, stigma, and structural inequality:

Disciplinary Power and Spatial Control

Beyond functioning as a physical space of confinement, the Gaokor operates as what Foucault conceptualises as a disciplinary architecture, a structure designed to regulate behaviour through spatial arrangement and symbolic exclusion. The hut's location at the margins of the village reinforces its association with impurity, restricting women's movements not only through physical separation but through the anticipation of moral surveillance. This is evident in the scene where the young girl, immediately after menarche, is directed to leave the household and walk alone toward the isolated hut without resistance or questioning. The absence of overt enforcement in this moment highlights how discipline is internalised. Women regulate how they sit, sleep, eat, and interact, becoming agents of their own control within a micro-regime of discipline.

This spatial regulation is further intensified by the cyclical nature of menstruation. Unlike one-time rituals, menstrual seclusion recurs monthly, embedding discipline within the rhythms of everyday life. Each cycle reinforces women's subordinate relationship to space, mobility, and social roles, as subtly suggested through the film's repeated visual return to the hut. In this sense, menstruation becomes a recurring moment where power relations are re-established and normalised. Moreover, the physical separation between the household and the Gaokor reflects a broader gendered division of space, where "pure" and "impure" domains are socially constructed and enforced. By confining women to the margins, menstruation becomes a mechanism for policing where women can and cannot exist.

Stigma, Silence, and Social Identity

The regulation of menstruating bodies is sustained not only through spatial discipline but also through processes of stigma and silence. Drawing on Goffman's framework, menstruating

women in the film are constructed as temporarily “impure,” transforming a natural biological condition into a socially discrediting identity. This is reflected in scenes where food is placed at a distance for the menstruating woman, avoiding direct contact and reinforcing her exclusion from everyday interaction. Such practices illustrate how stigma operates as a mechanism of social order, maintaining hierarchical distinctions related to purity and pollution. This stigmatisation is deeply internalised, shaping women’s emotional experiences and behaviour. The film captures silent suffering, where women rarely question or resist seclusion. Their compliance reflects what Goffman describes as “normative adjustment,” as individuals manage their conduct to align with social expectations. Feelings of shame, fear of moral judgement, and the desire to preserve family honour become part of this emotional labour. The absence of verbal resistance, particularly in moments of visible discomfort or hesitation, highlights how stigma is lived psychologically as well as socially.

Silence plays a crucial role in sustaining this system. The near absence of dialogue in the film reflects a form of discursive silence, where menstruation remains unspoken yet strictly regulated. This silence prevents open discussion and reinforces ignorance, allowing stigma to persist across generations. Indeed, the role of elder women as custodians of menstrual norms demonstrates how these practices are transmitted intergenerationally. Mothers, grandmothers, and aunts normalise seclusion as a duty rather than a constraint, reinforcing Foucault’s argument that power circulates through familial and social institutions. In this context, menstrual seclusion may also be understood as a form of symbolic violence, where women accept restrictive practices as natural, masking underlying gendered oppression.

Health, Agency, and Structural Inequality

The implications of menstrual seclusion extend beyond symbolic regulation to significantly impact women's health and agency. From the perspective of the Social Determinants of Health, the Gaokor illustrates how material and social conditions interact to shape well-being. The depiction of women resting on bare floors without proper bedding or sanitation highlights the physical risks associated with seclusion, including exposure to unhygienic conditions, malnutrition, and fatigue. At the same time, social isolation contributes to psychological distress, reinforcing feelings of inferiority and exclusion.

These conditions also restrict women's autonomy and participation in everyday life. The enforced separation from household activities, particularly cooking and caregiving roles, limits women's decision-making power and reinforces their subordinate status. For adolescent girls, menstrual seclusion disrupts school attendance and social interaction, with long-term consequences for educational attainment and social mobility. These effects are further intensified by structural inequalities such as poverty and rural marginalisation, where limited access to sanitation and healthcare exacerbates the challenges faced by women. In this sense, menstrual seclusion emerges not merely as a cultural practice but as a structural determinant of gender inequality and health disparity.

Representation, Resistance, and the Need for Intervention

The film's cinematic language plays a critical role in exposing these structures of power and inequality. Through long, static shots, confined spaces, and minimal dialogue, Gaokor visually amplifies the isolation and silence experienced by menstruating women. The use of empty landscapes and shadowed interiors highlights their detachment from community life, transforming the film into a form of social critique that challenges normalised

practices. At the same time, the film reveals subtle moments of resistance. Gestures such as hesitation, discomfort, and reflective gazes suggest an underlying tension between compliance and personal experience. For instance, the young girl's pause before entering the hut or her backward glance toward the household indicates that adherence does not necessarily imply acceptance. These moments align with the idea that resistance exists within structures of power, even if it remains muted and symbolic.

The persistence of menstrual seclusion also highlights the need for culturally grounded interventions. The film suggests that material solutions alone, such as the provision of sanitary products, are insufficient to challenge deeply embedded norms. Effective interventions must engage with community beliefs, involve local stakeholders, and promote dialogue that redefines menstruation as a natural and dignified process. Addressing menstrual stigma therefore requires both structural and cultural transformation.

The analysis indicates that menstrual seclusion in Gaokor: A Period House functions as a complex system where disciplinary power, stigma, and structural inequality intersect. Spatial isolation emerges as a key mechanism of control, with the Gaokor operating as a site of surveillance that produces self-regulation and conformity to norms of purity. At the same time, social labelling reinforces stigma, marking menstruating women as “impure” and generating both psychological distress and social exclusion. The intersection of these processes produces significant health risks, including exposure to unhygienic conditions and emotional isolation, while also limiting women's agency and participation in education, labour, and community life.

Furthermore, the findings highlight that menstrual seclusion is sustained through intergenerational transmission and cultural

normalisation, making it resistant to change through material interventions alone. Addressing this practice therefore requires culturally sensitive approaches that challenge stigmatising beliefs, promote open dialogue, and involve community actors in reshaping norms. Theoretically, the integration of Foucauldian and Goffmanian perspectives demonstrates how power and stigma operate together to construct menstruation as a site of control, reinforcing broader structures of gender inequality.

Conclusion: Towards Dignity, Health and Social Inclusion

The short film *Gaokor* offers a powerful visual narrative of menstrual seclusion, revealing it not as an isolated cultural custom but as a deeply structured practice that shapes women's health, dignity, and social participation. The film's depiction of confinement, surveillance, and exclusion underscores how menstrual practices continue to operate as mechanisms of social control. As Foucault asserts, power circulates through everyday rituals that regulate bodies and normalise compliance (*Discipline and Punish* 135–69). In the context of *Gaokor*, disciplinary power is enacted through the spatial segregation of menstruating women, the moral policing performed by families and communities, and the internalisation of purity norms that dictate acceptable behaviour. The *Gaokor* becomes a disciplinary institution, a site where women learn to monitor their own movements, emotions, and interactions in anticipation of judgement. This normalisation of restriction demonstrates how power embeds itself in cultural expectations, subtly shaping bodily experiences and gendered identities.

Goffman's theory of stigma further illuminates how menstruating women in *Gaokor* are socially marked as "impure" and treated as outsiders within their own households and communities (Goffman 3). This labelling transforms a natural biological process into a socially discrediting condition,

producing emotions of shame, embarrassment, and psychological distress. Stigma, as Goffman argues, is relational, upheld through collective beliefs and social enforcement. In Gaokor, stigma not only isolates women physically but also symbolically delegitimises their social identity. Such marginalisation restricts their access to emotional support, education, labour, and community life, reinforcing entrenched gender hierarchies. Addressing the persistence of Gaokor practices therefore requires more than hygiene distribution or awareness programs; it demands a structural transformation of the socio-cultural systems that sustain menstrual stigma and bodily regulation. Policy and health interventions must simultaneously tackle material challenges—such as sanitation, nutrition, safety, and menstrual products—and symbolic challenges, including gendered myths, silence around menstruation, and the moral frameworks that define purity and pollution. Community-based dialogues, participatory health education, and culturally sensitive engagement with elders, religious leaders, and women’s groups are essential for reshaping attitudes and dismantling inherited norms.

Promoting menstrual dignity requires a shift from viewing menstruation as a contaminating condition to recognising it as a natural component of women’s health. Interventions informed by the Social Determinants of Health framework must therefore incorporate gender justice, bodily autonomy, and social inclusion. By integrating Foucauldian and Goffmanian lenses, this analysis shows that menstrual seclusion is not merely a tradition, but a socially embedded practice where power, stigma, and health intersect. Meaningful change must address both the structural mechanisms that discipline women’s bodies and the psychosocial processes that stigmatise them. Ultimately, dismantling the Gaokor as a physical and symbolic space is crucial for ensuring women’s dignity, agency, and well-being. A future directed toward gender equality must reject practices that confine, silence, and “other” menstruating women, and instead

cultivate a society where bodily processes are understood without shame and where women can participate freely, safely, and fully in community life. Discrimination only because of menstruation not only restricts women's right over their own bodies but also leads to continuation of gender inequality implicating women as inferior because of their biological difference. Hence, normalisation of menstruation as impure should be stopped and issues related to menstruation health and hygiene must be openly discussed to make people aware about the consequences which can arise from it.

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