



GLOBAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH
(Scholarly Peer Review Publishing System)

A BLOODY FIGHT: AN OVERVIEW OF MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM

Rosemaria Regy Mathew

M.Phil. Scholar,

School of English and Foreign Languages,

Gandhigram Rural Institute,

India

bellarose913@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Menstruation is an event which is intrinsic to the feminine consciousness and a healthy attitude with respect to menstruation is of great significance for a complete female liberation. Although women are now much more educated and self-reliant than in any other era in history, menstruation is still a matter of shame, embarrassment and secrecy for many. The paper gives a brief summary of the origin and development of menstrual activism. It explicates the two major branches of menstrual activism as discussed by Chris Bobel, in her work *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010). The two dominant wings of menstrual activism are (a) feminist-spiritualists and (b) radical menstruation activists. Menstrual activism emerged in the 1970s and it attacks menstrual stigma and the dominant cultural and social narrative of menstruation. It is one of the latest and least known developments in feminist studies and few are aware of the theoretical developments in this field.

Key Words: Feminist-spiritualist, cultural feminism, body literacy, radical menstruators, corporate control.

1. INTRODUCTION

Menstruation, in the primitive times, was considered as magical, mysterious and even poisonous. However, it was not always seen as a taboo. In ancient and matrilineal cultures, it was a mark of honour and power, and was viewed as a sacred time for women to rest and revive their bodies. The characterisation of menstruation as ‘the curse’ in Western societies did not emerge until the nineteenth century. During the Victorian era, male physicians intervened in what had been a female domain and assumed the role of an expert, taking over the definition and treatment of menstruation. Ever since, most of the research on menstruation has focused on the medical dimension of the phenomenon such as menstrual disorders, premenstrual syndrome etc. Emily Martin in *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction* (2001) points out that even scientific and medical discourse casts female bodily processes as failed production. In her essay “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles”, she writes, “Medical texts describe menstruation as the “debris” of the uterine lining” (486).

2. MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM

Despite the overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward menstruation, a more encouraging outlook has emerged in the recent years. Menstrual activism emerged in the 1970s with the dawn of the feminist health movement which may be termed as the ‘mother of menstrual activism’. Women’s health movement was based on the foundational assumption that under the dominant medical system, women have lacked control over their bodies and their health. The medical system, designed and serviced primarily by men, ignores women’s unique bodily experiences and thus fails to provide women-centered care. Thus, during the 1970s, women’s health movement, environmentalism and consumer activism intertwined to produce menstrual activism. Menstrual activism is part of third-wave feminism, is environmentalist, anti-corporate, body-oriented and is rooted in everyday practices. Menstrual activism is thus an outgrowth of mid- to late twentieth century feminist women’s health activism and has emerged as a popular topic in contemporary feminism studies in the last two decades. Activists protest against menstrual stigma and try to drive home the basic idea that women are not unclean or untouchable or any less human when they menstruate. They question the safety of menstrual products as well as the

social construction of menstruation as little more than a shameful process. This has helped create a critical menstrual consciousness. Chris Bobel, in her work *New Blood: Third- Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010), discusses the two wings of the menstrual activism movement- 'feminist- spiritualists' and 'radical menstruators'.

3. FEMINIST- SPIRITUALISTS

Feminist- spiritualists try to reclaim menstruation as a healthy, spiritual, sacred, empowering and even a pleasurable experience for women. They give more importance to the spiritual dimension of menstruation. For them, menstruation is magical, mysterious and powerful; it presents women with a unique opportunity to develop a self- awareness that puts them in charge of their bodies and lives. Bernadette Valley, founder of the British Women's Environmental Network points out that menstruation is one of the most powerful times of her month- for magic, contemplation and for honouring bodily fluids (qtd. in Bobel 68). Tamara Slayton, founder of the Menstrual Health Foundation in 1884, defines menstruation as a "matrix where a woman could go each month, into herself, to develop insight perspective and wisdom" (qtd. in Bobel 69). Barbara Hannelore, a former student of Slayton, opines that menstruation is "a prayerful state, a time of inner activism" (qtd. in Bobel 68). All these statements reflect the ideals of feminist- spiritualist activism.

For the feminists- spiritualists, menstruation is a fundamental aspect of womanhood. They assert that through menstruation, women are able to know who they are and can feel whole and proud. The feminist- spiritualists emphasise that menstruation is neither a curse nor a meaningless hassle, it is a process unique to biological women; it connects them to each other and to the essential feminine within. The idea of the 'essential feminine' and menstruation as a common link between all women are vital aspects of the feminists- spiritualists. "As menstruators, women are linked to women of previous eras; in the present, across class, race. . . bleeding is an essential woman's experience, a universalizing hallmark of fertility, sexuality, and identity" (Bobel 70). Hence for a woman, her menstruation is what she has in common with all women who have ever lived. Thus, feminists- spiritualists consider menstruation as a common denominator for womanhood.

Feminist- spiritualist activism is closely associated with cultural feminism. According to cultural feminism, cultural devaluation of women is at the root of gender- based oppression and gender equality will be achieved if the so- called woman's qualities (whether socialised or inherent), such as nurturance, empathy, compassion, and caring, are championed throughout the society. A key aspect of the cultural feminist tradition is the belief that oppression of women does not arise out of the differences from the sexes per se, but is the consequence of a patriarchal hierarchy that denigrates and disadvantages women and the feminine qualities associated with them.

Cultivation of 'body literacy' is a significant element of feminist- spiritualist activism. Body literacy helps women to develop self- awareness, that is, knowledge of how their bodies function, so that they can assess what is normal and what is not. In terms of reproductive and sexual health, women become body literate when they can read and comprehend signs, events and outcomes related to their menstrual cycles and are able to use this knowledge as a foundation for lifelong sexual and reproductive health choices. Body literacy, in the context of menstruation, is especially important in a patriarchal and consumer culture that *constructs* women's bodies as "unpredictable entities that must be controlled and contained" (Bobel 82) which often leads women to perceive their menstrual blood as repulsive.

Feminist- spiritualists mainly try to reframe menstruation as a special time in a woman's life that should be honoured, a gift that should be celebrated, and as a sacred, powerful and creative time for *all* women. They focus mainly on self- empowerment of women and call for a change in the very way women view their menstruation and respond to menstrual cycles. It advocates a shift in menstrual consciousness which in turn leads to self- acceptance and fulfilment for women. They believe that when a woman views her body as a powerful source of wisdom, profound healing occurs at the individual's physical, emotional and spiritual level. Thus, feminist- spiritualism calls for a self- transformation rather than political activity. They also believe that a renewal of the feminine principles of sensitivity, creativity, nurturance, caring etc. can reduce the large scale environmental destruction and violence that is now prevalent.

However feminist- spiritual menstrual activism has been criticised for a number of factors. One of the greatest and most severe criticisms raised against it is that the kind of essentialism upon which it is built ultimately reinscribes gender roles. It neglects other sources of oppression such as those based on racial, ethnic, religious, sexual and class differences. Since feminist- spiritualists articulate a 'menstruation- positive perspective', they are greeted with a range of negative reactions from apathy to outrage. Some argue that feminist- spiritualist activists overstate the power of menstruation to transform women's lives. It is also heavily infused with a spiritualist orientation and essentialist conceptions of womanhood. Feminist- spiritualist activists have also been criticised for their valourisation of reproduction in women's lives as they celebrate menarche as a transition to womanhood. Another major defect with feminist- spiritualist activism is that its prescription to women to take time out to renew themselves is not practically possible for women with fewer privileges. For instance, women who enjoy little privacy, mothers with limited time etc. can hardly engage in practices of self-care.

4. RADICAL- MENSTRUATORS

The second of the two dominant wings of contemporary menstrual activism is the radical menstruation wing. Just like the feminist-spiritualists, radical menstruation activists reject the portrayal of menstruation as shameful and a useless hassle best hidden from view. However, these activists reject a romanticised view of menstruation. Although they resist the menstrual taboo, they do not elevate menstruation to the status of a spiritual experience. They perceive menstruation as neither a gift nor a curse but simply as a bodily process. Radical menstruation activists challenge not only the status quo, but also the dichotomous gender structure which is at the root of gender- based oppression. While “feminist- spiritualists embrace menstruation as meaningful experience unique to women and foreground their identity as women who menstruate, radical menstruation activists uncouple the gendered body from menstruation. Women who menstruate become ‘menstruators’ ” (Bobel 100). Courtney Dailey, one of the founders of Bloodsisters, links radical menstruation with wider struggles for human rights against capitalism, racism, classism, homophobia, heterosexuality etc.

While the feminist- spiritualists are heavily influenced by cultural feminism, the radical menstruation activists identify with third- wave feminism (not always by name, but often through discourse and actions). They do not identify with the woman- as-nurturer representation and also dissociate themselves from the cultural feminist celebration of the body. Third- wave feminists focus on multiplicity, contradiction, anti- essentialism etc. They also argue to make room for gender- variant people and do not perpetuate exclusionary rigid definitions of identity. Thus, several factors besides gender, such as race, class etc., constitute and shape one’s life and experiences. Radical menstruators point out that feminist- spiritualist idea of linking menstruation with reproduction does not add up for women who do not identify with their procreative capacities (or lack of capacities) and that it also excludes young girls, post-menopausal and transgendered women; and women who for myriad other reasons cannot bleed.

Radical menstruation activism strongly resists the ‘corporate control’ of menstruation and promotes the use of reusable menstrual products. One cannot ignore the fact that commerce has played major role in the cultural construction of menarche and menstruation in the contemporary period. Hence these advocate menstruators to ‘take control of their blood’ and challenge the corporate interests that exploit and reinforce a cultural construction of menstruation as a curse to be managed. The ‘bleeding body’ of menstruators has been subject to what the radical menstruation activists term as ‘corporate colonisation’. Radical menstruation activists see menstruation as a bodily event shaped by consumerism and controlled by corporations that disregard both human and environmental health. They advocate that each ‘menstruator’ should take control back from corporations.

5. CONCLUSION

While feminist- spiritualists focus on self- transformation, radical menstruation activists seek radicalisation of both thought and protest action. Although the latter agree that a real awareness of menstruation offers great benefits, they do not perceive menstruation as a mystical or magical event as the feminist- spiritualists. Although feminist- spiritualist and radical menstruation activism have striking differences, both wings are characterised by a radical view of menstruation. Both incorporate a critique of the dominant cultural narrative of menstruation and promote alternative framings united by a refusal to exploit women’s bodies. While feminist-spiritualists aim at the transformation of ‘menstrual consciousness’ and frame menstruation as a spiritually endowed, women- centered experience that unites all women; radical menstruation activists see the feminist- spiritualist project as limited since it fails to touch the corporate structures that disempower menstruators.

Radical menstruation activists attack corporations who, according to them, have colonised the body of the menstruators. Thus, feminist- spiritualists emphasise gender differences and assert that women’s characteristics and qualities are superior and should be celebrated. But radical menstruators hold the view that although there are biologically based gender differences, they neither imply inferiority or superiority nor justify gender inequities. However, both these wings of menstrual activism manifest a commitment to an alternative view of the menstruating body and refuse to banish menstruation to a private world of shame and secrecy. While feminist-spiritualists focus more on the individual woman and attempt to glorify menstruation, radical menstruators are more radical and revolutionary.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bobel, Chris. 2010 *New Blood: Third- Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation*. USA: Rutgers UP.
- [2] Hufnagel, Glenda Lewin. 2012 *A History of Women’s Menstruation From Ancient Greece To The Twenty- First Century: Psychological, Social, Medical, Religious, and Educational Issues*. USA: Edwin Mellen Press,
- [3] Johnston- Robledo, I. and J.C.Chrisler. 2017. “The Menstrual Mark: Menstruation as Social Stigma.” *Sex Roles* 68.1(2013): 9- 18. Web.
- [4] Martin, Emily. 2016. “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles.” *Signs* 16.3 (1991): 485- 501. *JSTOR*.
- [5] ---. 2001. *The Woman in the Body: A Cultural Analysis of Reproduction*. Boston: Beacon Press,
- [6] Sanchez, Erika L. 2017. “Why Are We Conditioning Young Women To Consider a Biological Process Shameful?” N.p., 28 May 2015.