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Blood and Bread: A Study of Food related Menstrual Taboos

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Roshna V

Research Scholar, Department of English, Calicut University Campus

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

Food is the most inevitable part of our existence. In many cultures and communities around the world, a menstruating woman's contact with food is strictly prohibited because it is considered as dangerous to herself and to the people around her. Hunting was the most primitive act of accessing food and a menstruating woman's food taboos begins with the hunt. When hunting gradually began to be replaced by agriculture, food taboos for menstruating women became prevalent in the case of agriculture too. Menstrual food taboos have been staying alive from the days of hunting to the days of most modern food accessing methods. This paper attempts to study about the food related menstrual taboos which have been imposed upon menstruating women by various cultural communities.

Key Words: Food, Taboo, Menstruation**Introduction**

Menstruation is one of the most important biological feature of around half of the world population. In many societies around the world, instead of considering it as a biological process, menstruation has been attributed with different social and cultural meanings and interpretations. From time immemorial, a menstruating woman has been viewed as dangerous to herself and to the people, particularly men, around her. As Simon de Beauvoir has pointed out in *The Second Sex*: “she inspires horror in man” (Beauvoir 201). South African tribes like Bacas believed that if a man touches a menstruating woman then his bones become fragile. The people of New Guinea considered that the mere sight of a menstruating woman will make a man's body swell up. The natives of Motwat and Daudai have no doubt that sexual relationship with a menstruating woman will lead to the death of the man (Reed 96). These popular assumptions about the threatening supernatural powers of menstruating women motivated men to impose taboos upon her.

In order to keep away from her physical presence and deadly influence, cultures imposed several restrictions and methods upon menstruating women. Even the rites of menarche focus on the segregation and humiliation of girls. There are horrible practices like genital mutilation and enclosing girls in menstrual huts in many parts of the world. Cultures and communities not only secluded menstruating women in menstrual huts but also prohibited her from touching various substances and forbade her from practicing her daily routines. Beatrix Hauser in her book *Promising Rituals* writes

that a menstruating woman is “to interrupt her usual hygienic routine. This includes her daily bath, brushing her teeth, combing and oiling her hair, applying cosmetics and adorning her body with jewelry” (Hauser 102). Hauser

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http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

noticed further that “Married women won't apply vermilion in the hair parting and also emit the forehead mark (*bindi*). None of them decorate their feet with red dye (*alata*). Telugu women will also abstain from using their favored turmeric-based facials” (Hauser 102). Menstruating women's contact with water is strictly prohibited in various societies because it is considered as harmful. Avoidance of swimming, bathing and hair washing during menstruation were typical in many primitive and early modern communities. The justifications given for this was that women are physically weak and sensitive during menstruation and, therefore, liable to infections. In addition, they believed that contact with water will lead to the loss of too much blood or menstruation might even stop altogether (Newton 120). But as a matter of fact, in an era when there were only public water resources, early humans have to avoid any risk of contagion of water by this bodily bloody fluid which is considered as poisonous and pollutant.

One of the most important restrictions imposed upon menstruating woman is preventing her from the contact with food. Food is an essential component to sustain the process of life. Traditionally man is considered as the breadwinner and woman is considered as the bread maker of a family. While the man gathered or earned the unprocessed raw food stuffs, it was the duty of the woman to process, convert or prepare it to something edible. Women's monthly bleeding had its influence not only upon the processing of food but also on the process of gathering. Seeing as dangerous to the day to day life of man, menstruating bodies and menstrual blood have been kept away from the food accessing, processing or preserving means and spaces. When hunting was a crucial activity and the most primal food accessing mode, the biological process of menstruation had its effects on hunting. Even though there are rare cultural communities like Yafar men of New Guinea who secretly collect their wives' menstrual blood to enhance hunting, most of the communities believed in the harmful effects of menstruation on hunting. Menstruating women were strictly prohibited from hunting because it has been believed that the odour associated with menstruation will drive the animals away. Among the communities where still the practice of hunting persists, menstrual taboos related to hunting do exist. R.L Kelly notes that some of the taboos prohibit menstruating women even from touching a hunter's gear (Kelly 476). According to Eskimos, contact with a menstruating woman can lead to failure in hunting. Hables, a tribe from the Western Sudan, forbids a man from hunting whose wife is menstruating (Delaney et.al. 10).

When agriculture enormously replaced hunting as the most efficient and practical food gathering method, menstrual taboos diffused into agriculture too. Food related menstrual taboos became more severe. By imposing menstrual taboos, various cultural groups explicitly propagated the notion that menstruation is dangerous to the crops. They believed that menstruation affects the germination of seed, development of roots and leaves, and the process of flowering and ripening of fruit. Book 7 and 28 of *Natural History* of Roman natural philosopher Gaius Plinius Secundus ('Pliny the Elder', 23-79 AD) reflect the contemporary Roman perspectives about menstruation. Pliny warns that “Contact with it [menstrual blood] turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees falls off... (Pliny 549). Another Roman scholar Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella in Book 11 of his volume on agriculture writes about the dangerous effects of menstruation on agriculture that “Care, however, must be taken that a woman is admitted as little as possible to the place where the cucumbers and gourds are planted; for usually the growth of green-stuff is checked by contact with a woman; indeed if she is also in the period of menstruation, she will kill the young produce merely by looking at it” (Columella 161). The Australian Arunta tribe prohibited menstruating women from collecting the irriakura bulbs, a staple of their diet. Among Malekula community, one of the tribes of the New Hebridg islands, menstruating woman and her husband are not allowed to enter in the field where plants are growing (Delaney et.al 10). Menstrual taboos related to food are not restricted to plants and crops but expand into the case of sea foods too. Laplanders feared for their fisheries and forbade menstruating women from walking on adjacent shorelines (Meyer 126). G.H. Losliel's *History of the Mission of the United Brethren among the Indians of North America* points out that “In Ceram, a special hut is for women... but on no account are they to eat any fish from the river. Not many years ago a

young woman was solemnly tried on the charge of having eaten a fish while she was unclean; she was condemned and executed in the presence of the people, by being thrown from a rock into the river.... (qtd. in Briffault 380). Thus food accessing methods like hunting and fishing and food production methods like agriculture had been influenced by menstruation.

Food taboos related to menstruation are not just restricted to forests and fields but extended to the spaces like kitchen where the food is prepared or cooked. In several societies menstruating women are not allowed to enter kitchen. Even though a woman is forced to spend considerable hours in kitchen during her non-menstruating days, she is not allowed to enter or prepare food in the kitchen nor can she touch food or kitchen utensils during menstruation. This practice is still prevalent in many Indian communities even in this twenty first century. For example, in Kerala, women in most Nair and Thiyya families, are allowed to enter kitchen only after the ritual bath post their menstrual period. Alma Gottlieb and Thomas Buckley point out in their book *The Blood Magic* that among the Beng community of the Ivory Coast menstruating women are not permitted to prepare food and men could not eat food prepared by menstruating women (qtd.in Newton 40). In rural Portugal, according to a research conducted by Densie L. Lawrence, there are constraints for menstruating women in their annual pig slaughtering ceremony. It has been believed that a menstruating woman's presence at the time of pig slaughtering will cause the pork to spoil and the processing of the pork is also harmfully affected (Lawrence 124).

Food related restrictions for menstruating women are also extended to their manner and ways of consumption of food. Beauvoir writes about Egyptian menstrual restrictions on food that “she [menstruating woman] must not touch food with her fingers; sometimes she is strictly forbidden to eat; in other cases, her mother and sister are permitted to feed her with an instrument; but all objects that come in contact with her during this period must be burned”(Beauvoir 202). James Frazer notes down in *The Golden Bough*:

Among the Bribri Indians of Costa Rica the only plates she may use for her food are banana leaves, which when she has done with them, she throws away in some sequestered spot; for were a cow to find them, and eat them, it would waste away. And she drinks out of a special vessel for the same reason: if anyone drank out of the same cup after her, he would surely die. (Frazer 212-13)

Studying the menstrual restrictions prevalent among the Airo-Pai of Amazonian Peru, Luisa Elvira Belaunde noted that Airo-Pai women “must sit in a corner of their home surrounded by banana leaves. The husband is not allowed to hand his wife's food directly to her, but must place it on a banana leaf and let a child give the food to her”(qtd. in Newton 39).

Indian Ayurvedic discourse and tradition suggests severe restrictions for menstruating women. *Sushruta Samhita* (Sarira Sthanam 8.4) suggests several regimens to be observed during menses. According to *Sushruta Samhita* “a women in her menses should lie down on a mattress made of kus`a blade (during the first three days of her uncleanness), should take her food from her own blended palms or from earthen saucers, or from trays made of leaves. She should live on a course of Habishya diet and foreswear during the time, even the sight of her husband (chapter II,127). *Charaka Samhita* (Sarirasthana 2/25) advises that “After the onset of menstruation, for 3 days and nights, the woman should observe celibacy, should sleep on the ground, take food with hands from an unbroken utensil and should not cleanse her body in any way” (Charaka Sarirasthana 2/25). *Sankarasmriti* (*Laghudharmaprakasika*), which is considered as the foremost religious text of Hinduism and Brahminism in particular, records several duties of women during menstruation. *Sankarasmriti* warns that menstruating woman “should not eat her food in a bell-metal plate, instead she may use plantain leaf and acting like a celibate she may lie down on the ground avoiding sleep during the day time” (12.3.6) (302). “According to the book of Manu”, writes Melissa Meyer, “a brahmana eating dinner should not look at 'a Candala (a man belonging to the despised caste), a menstuous woman, a boar, a fowl, a dog and a hermaphrodite'. A menstruating woman

was among the worst of the company” (Meyer 127).

The cultural belief of menstrual pollution and impurity is the underlying reason behind these menstrual taboos associated with food. To get away from menstrual contamination, menstruating women are forbidden from being in contact with man, matters and materials around them. As Delaney, Lupton and Toth have noticed “The measures he [man] has taken to avoid this mysterious substance have affected his mealtimes, bedtimes and his hunting seasons...” (Delaney et. al 5). Safety was/is always a major concern of producers and consumers of food. In order to ensure food safety, from generation to generation, individuals, especially women, are asked to practice good personal hygiene habits such as keeping fingernails clean, tying their long hair and washing hands. Since menstruation itself is considered as a pollutant, menstruating bodies have to be renounced from the premises of food. By conducting a survey among women, Kumar and Srivastava in 2011 reported that for the women belong to the in Marwari families of India, attending guests and serving them food are strictly prohibited. They are also not allowed to touch new grocery items because those items are part of the kitchen (Kumar 599). In order to confirm the accounts in folklores about the menstruating women's effects on fruits, wine and beer, mushrooms, bread baking, and other items of plant life and fungi, Austro Hungarian medical researcher Dr. Bela Schick has conducted several experiments. The researcher concluded that menotoxins, menstrual poisons, are present in the skin and secretions of menstruating women. These are injurious to plants, fungi and several food items (Newton 117). But, in reality, the presence of toxins in menstrual blood is not authentically proved so far. By presenting menstruation as dangerous to plants, fungi and food, in the name of ensuring food safety, menstruating women have been ideologically discriminated because of their bodily process.

Dietary restrictions for menstruating women are not rare in many parts of the world. When material surplus brought by colonialism and industrial revolution resulted in early sexual maturation among girls, dietary restrictions became dominant like never before. Medical science, representing and reinforcing the cultural interpretations of menstruation, defended the need of food restrictions for menstruating women. British physician Dr. William Buchan argued that “a full diet, consisting chiefly of salted, high seasoned, or acid food” (Buchan 331) are the causes of early and excessive menstruation. In his *Treats on the Management of Female Complaints and of Children in Early Infancy* (1792), Scottish physician Dr. Alexander Hamilton advised menstruating girls that “the food should be plain and simple, such as may not overload the stomach or disturb the bowels” (Hamilton 78). During the Victorian era, morality suppressed sexuality terribly, and early menstruation have been perceived as the result of excessive sexual stimuli. Contemporary medical science made a connection between food, sexuality and menstruation. Victorian medical science, which could not contemplate sexuality without distaste, identified that “to begin menstruation at an early age was unhealthy, frequently made a connection between an early menarche... and overdeveloped sexuality” (Lander 20). Medical practitioners of the age found that overdeveloped sexuality is the product of spicy and stimulating food culture. They advised to follow dietary restrictions to maintain a regular menstruation. These medical myths propagated as scientific truth influenced the collective consciousness and many contemporary women followed and practiced them blindly. Even in some rural areas of India, young girls are asked to avoid food items like curd, tamarind and pickles; because it is believed that such food habits disturb menstrual cycle. The fear of spicy food and full diet, created by the early medical science, is still prevalent among a considerable number of women.

Perhaps menstrual taboos like segregation in menstrual huts, abstaining from kitchen and prohibition from their daily assigned works have been created by the matriarchal societies with an intention to get an opportunity to rest and relax at least once in a month. But, when the patriarchy began to dominate, these advantages turned as disadvantages and the menstrual practices became severe and were forcefully imposed upon women. Menstrual taboos related to food including distancing women from fields and forests, prohibiting them from entering kitchen, restricting them from preparing food, imposing manners and modes of eating and restrictions on food items are, undoubtedly, make

menstruation experience terrible for a considerable number of women around the world. It's high time to liberate ourselves of these myths and superstitions related to menstruation.

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