

## Myths vs Education: A Study of Abject Identity of North-Eastern Indian Women during Menstruation through Haripriya Soibam's Select Poems in *Tattooed with Taboos*

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India is a country renowned worldwide for its spiritual practices and as home to gods and goddesses. Among them, one such place situated in the North-East region of India, in the state of Assam, is the sacred temple of Devi Kamakhya. The temple is widely famous among masses and sages across the world. It is said that this temple in itself is one among the 51 *Saktheepeethas* of Devi Sati. Devi Sati who was wife of lord Shiva, plunged into a 'vedika' or fire alter because her father insulted her husband Lord Shiva hailed as the god of destruction. Upon this Lord Shivawas so heartbroken and distraught after the death of Devi Sati that he danced with the body of the goddess in his hand and performed the maddening dance of death, the 'Tandav', which could destruct the world. In order to stop Lord Shiva from this maddening dance of death, Lord Vishnu went ahead and cut the body of the Devi Sati with his 'Chakra' into 51 parts. All these parts fell on the ground at 51 different places in India. Among these 51 body parts, one part of her body fell in Assam in the area of Kaamrupa. This part was the genital part of a female body called a 'YONI'. It is said that since then all these parts are being worshipped as 51 *Saktheepeethas*.

The temple of Kammakhya Devi is a worship place of Devi Sati's 'Yoni' or a part that symbolizes fertility or progeny. However, this temple is closed in the month of June or in the month of *Aashaadh* (a Hindi Month), because it is believed that during this duration the goddess menstruates. For these three days the sacred idol of the goddess' 'YONI' is covered with a white cloth and then the temple is closed. On this

occasion, a celebration called *Ambuvachi* is organized. Several sages, Naga devotees, and common people come here to visit and seek blessings from the sacred temple. It is said during these days the colour of the sacred river Brahmaputra turns red or crimson due to the menstruating blood of goddess Sati that makes the land fertile and pure. People celebrate the menstruation of goddess Sati. After completion of the festival, the white cloth is distributed among the devotees as 'Prasadam'. This *Prasadam* is considered holy and it symbolizes fertility. This is the power of the blood of the goddess, that too the menstrual blood. People come here to seek blessings for fertility and productivity. This fact clearly presents that menstruation was regarded as holy thing in ancient times in India (Singh).

However, this phenomenon witnessed a gradual shift and turned into a taboo or stigma for the common folk of women. Irony lies in the fact that the process of menstruation which is considered divine and is celebrated as a festival is pushed to the extent of untouchability and periodic out-casting of women during that period. Women are not allowed to enter into kitchen and are considered impure and are also refrained from entering the premises of temples and holy places during those days. Thus, the Foucauldian govern mentality around menstruation of humans can be mapped different from that of a goddess despite a woman usually been compared to a goddess.

The power structure and the difference in societal treatment of very same biological process reveal the diplomacy crafted for normative exclusion of women during this period. However, menstrual blood is regarded as an abject phenomenon in northern India. Julia Kristeva, a renowned French philosopher and psychoanalyst, introduced the theory of abjection in her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*(1980). According to Kristeva, abjection refers to the discomfort, disgust, and rejection that arise when encountering something that threatens the boundaries of our sense of self and societal order. It is a visceral response triggered by encountering what is considered impure, unclean, or taboo. Kristevagoes on to discuss about the bodily fluids like excreta and menstrual blood as polluting objects, she opines:

While they always relate to corporeal orifices as to so many landmarks parceling-constituting the body's territory, polluting objects fall, schematically, into two types: excremental and menstrual. Neither tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value. (71)

She also goes on to explain that since menstrual blood is closely connected to "a sexual or social identity it threatens the relationship between the sexes between a social aggregate." There have been few studies discussing about menstruation and the theory of abject by Kristeva but not much have been explored in light of any literary work and its analysis with a touchstone of abject theory. Ryan et al discuss about the premenstrual body dissatisfaction in their article published in Sage journal 'Feminism and Psychology', Natalie Rose Dyer reflects upon "From Abjection to Menstrual Imaginary", M Guilló-Arakistain discusses menstruation as subversion of body in their work "Challenging Menstrual Normativity From Abjection to Menstrual Imaginary: Non-essentialist Body Politics and Feminist Epistemologies of Health". Thus, there have been works on the theory of abjection but no such work has been found so far with a relational framework of readings of North-East Indian Literature with a lens of abjection which the present papers delves into. The present paper chooses to study Haripriya Soibam's two poems "Five Days' Untouchable" and "I Died a Little" through abject theory.

Haripriya Soibam, a North-Eastern writer and poet, in her book *Tattooed with Taboos* draws attention to the tabooed realities experienced by women through the poems anthologized in it. In her poem "Five Days' Untouchable" she questions on the impurity attached to menstrual blood which ironically is responsible for procreation. She at the very onset indisputably asks, "Is this the blood of life? Merely to mark me impure." (TT 18) The poet questions if this menstrual blood has the power to nurture a baby in the womb how does it make a woman impure? She gives her voice to a tabooed but universal phenomenon. Menstruation being a natural process is still seen with a distanced sense of loathing as Kristeva remarks. Her poem expresses how during this period women are quarantined for five days from the family and society "Wrapped

with untouchable Phanek”, she further depicts the narrative of untouchability attached to menstruation.

In Manipur, from where Haripriya Soibam and other writers of this book hail from, there is a practice of quarantining a menstruating woman for five days and this period is called ‘*mangba*’ “connoting and suggesting that the women during this period are ‘impure’ as used in the context of an object” (Ningombam). In this period women are not allowed near water bodies. “During menstruation period women are not allowed to touch any ‘clean’ object of the kitchen, they are not permitted to worship the household deities nor are they allowed to have conjugal relation (at least superficially)” (Ningobam). Thus, menstruation becomes an abject experience for a Meitei (a tribe in Manipur) woman. In Arnold van Gennep’s term the ‘rite of passage’ of puberty for women involves the first stage of “separation” where for five days women are separated from their regular belongingness to a state of brief exile.

This ostracisation often triggers feelings of abjection due to its association with bodily fluids, which are commonly considered unclean or impure in many cultures. The sight, smell, and mention of menstrual blood challenge societal norms of cleanliness and order, thereby invoking discomfort and repulsion in some individuals. Kristeva argues that abjection is a fundamental part of human experience and plays a crucial role in the formation of individual and collective identities. By excluding or separating what is deemed abject, individuals and societies establish a sense of boundaries and establish norms of what is acceptable or unacceptable within a particular cultural context. The North-Eastern women are culturally and socially out-casted during their menstruation period. They are treated as if they are untouchable. She expresses her agony in words in the poem “Five Days’ Untouchable”-

For five days  
Quarantined from the rest  
By this unholy fluid (TT 18)

In the northern region of India when a woman begins to bleed she is sent to dwell in a separate place, a kind of hut addressed as a menstrual

hut. For these five days, these women are prohibited to participate in any auspicious occasion like worshipping a god or attending a marriage. During menstruation they are even denied access to their home. They are prohibited to touch food, utensils, and water. For them, a special hut is made outside the home where they have to spend their menstrual period regardless of the climatic condition outside. They are served food from a distance. All these things take place because the people of this area consider that a woman's period renders her dirty and abject.

HariPriya tells in her poem that the people of the North-East believe if the male member of a family sees the drying *Phanek* on the rope, it may prove inauspicious to him. *Phanek* is a piece of cloth that is used by the North-Eastern woman to cover the lower part of the body. This piece of cloth is considered cursed and contaminated. The poet writes-

Phanek after Phanek  
Carrying my utouchable-ness  
Accursed piece of cloth  
Contaminated for a lifetime. (TT 18)

A stark contradiction has been presented by the poet when she puts that touching the same 'contaminated' *Phanek* is not taken into consideration by a man while assaulting a lady during day time or having intercourse at night, but mere the sight of a *Phanek* may prove inauspicious to them. This piece of *Phanek* again becomes an object of abjection which arouses disgust and abhorrence. This is how the patriarchal society creates systemic norms for women that are dichotomous and unjustifiable. For women, these norms are cursed but men can mold them according to their own will. She speaks out against this injustice as a poet and shows the duality of thought against women, "Neither nocturnal tryst nor daytime assault Defiled the hands that tore it away" (TT 18).

Obviously, it is the patriarchal and social constructs that have created such taboos and stigmas. Though these practices might have been made for the convenience of the women so that these women can have some rest during this difficult time, but over the period of time these practices

got interpreted and resultantly evolved into taboos and societal stigmas. The extent of its stigmatization is such that nobody wants to talk about this fact openly in public. It is this patriarchal thought that has led to such a significant gap between men and women. Kristeva argues in her work that abjection is a fundamental part of human experience and plays a crucial role in the formation of individual and collective identities. By excluding or separating what is deemed abject, individuals and societies establish a sense of boundaries and establish norms of what is acceptable or unacceptable within a particular cultural context. Through her poetry, Haripriya expresses how women are marginalised from society and restricted by a number of taboos and stigma associated with menstruation.

In another poem “I Died a Little” Haripariya shows the duality of patriarchal structures. She presents that this very blood, always red in color if flows from any other part of the body are not loathed with this intensity as of menstruation. Menstrual blood from female genital is abhorred whilst the same blood, oozed out from the same place and red in color, is desperately celebrated when seen during the first intercourse. If a girl does bleed on her first intercourse she is considered a virgin, pure and holy. But if the vagina fails to bleed during that time, the woman is mistreated and resultantly called by names. In the poem Haripriya gives her voice to the agony of ordinary woman and states-

I died a little  
Killed by impure little droplets  
That refused to trickle  
On the wedding night. (TT 22)

Though, these red droplets are welcomed and celebrated for the first time only to make her untouchable every month. Here, the poet expresses the inexpressible agony of every woman. There is a celebration of menarche as a rite of passage of puberty and it is a fact to boast for the society that a girl is now a woman as there is one more person to procreate the generation. But this is very ambiguous that the same blood which is welcomed with celebrations makes the same woman

impure and compels her to live outside of her own house as an untouchable being.

When this occurs, no one can comprehend the mental agony of young girls to whom society has given the title of a woman at the exact moment of her first period. A little young girl who plays innocently is abruptly barred from all of her activities and forced to live outside the home. She starts being treated as an untouchable being by the society. This girl in her innocence fails to comprehend these unexpected life changes. The sudden exclusion of a girl who does not understand the differences between women and girls confuses and pains her. This liminal phase of transition of a girl to woman is agonizing for this teenager who has to face exclusion at the hands of her own family. The first stage of rite of passage “separation” is tormenting for a girl and also perturbing to observe how a phenomenon that is celebrated on its commencement has rendered them untouchable for five days each month.

Haripriya is an iconoclast writer who dares to write about the agony of women that they undergo during menstruation. In the poem “I Die A Little” the poet brilliantly presents the comparison of menstrual experience to death by expressing they die little by little every time during menstrual cycle due to cramps and severe pain. Through these two poems Haripriya also explores the psychological implications resultant of the abject marginalization during menstruation. Apart from the physical pain, women have to suffer vast mental torture inflicted by society due to stigma and shame associated with menstruation, which many a times lead to a sense of embarrassment and a negative body image. This, in turn can contribute to anxiety, low self-esteem, and a reluctance to discuss or seek support for menstrual-related concerns and often cause reluctance to seek medical help if required. This becomes a deterrent factor and as Girish Kalyanaraman, Vice President and Category Leader, Feminine Care, Procter and Gamble India puts:

1 out of 5 girls in India drop out of school due to lack of menstrual education and access to sanitary products. The chapter on period education has been missing from schools, families, and communities

resulting in 71% of girls not knowing about periods when they first get it. (Indian Express)

In an NCBI study conducted on 600 girls in Delhi 40% dropped out of their schools because of menstruation.

A study by UN's child protection agency, UNICEF reveals: "71% of adolescent girls in India remain unaware of menstruation until they get their first period. When they do so, many drop out of school." Myths and social taboo is one significant reason for the same. Vandana Prasad, a community pediatrician and public health professional, states: "Social taboos still abound and girls face various forms of discrimination during their periods such as denial of certain foods, denial of physical access to spaces like kitchens and temples and on rare occasions even have to stay in some outhouse for a couple of days" (Krishnan). Thus, there is a dire need to update the curriculum keeping the period education concerns in mind.

The theory of abjection offers a valuable lens to examine the social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of the menstrual taboo. By understanding the roots and implications of abjection, the societal norms can be challenged to foster inclusive environments, and empower menstruating individuals. It is crucial to create spaces where open conversations about menstruation are encouraged, ensuring that no one feels ashamed or marginalized due to a natural bodily process. Only collective efforts can promote inclusivity and a sensitized understanding to the abjection of women during the process. Menstruation is atopic about which nobody wants to talk openly even in the contemporary times but Haripriya boldly treats this subject in her poems and shows the injustice happening to women. She strongly demands the destigmatization of menstruation. She openly treats this phenomenon in her book *Tattooed with Taboos* because she knows that nothing but literature and learning can help in removing these stigmas and taboos ostracizing women. These poems if included in the educational curriculum can not only sensitize generations but will also foster inclusive spaces for women.



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