



# MY RIGHT TO BLEED : A WOMAN'S VOICE

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## Abstract :

Menstrual taboos are found in the practices of most religions. These religions being predominantly patriarchal have denied women their place in the clergy using menstruation as one of the reasons. A woman's body is 'unclean' or 'polluting' as it menstruates hence rendering it unfit to serve God who is most Pure. This article seeks to highlight the disguised misogyny for women by patriarchal system using religion as a tool.

## INTRODUCTION:

A woman's body has been a subject of both, admiration and ridicule throughout the ages. Poets have exalted it as mysterious, painters as an object of beauty and religions fear it. This fear is internalized in various religious practices such as exclusion of women from higher positions in the clergy and leadership, rituals, access to salvation, amongst others.

Most commonly, this exclusion is explained vis-a-vis menstruation. A woman's body is perceived as 'impure', 'unclean' because she menstruates. This article seeks to study the attitudes various major religions share on menstruation and expose the unjustified patriarchal attitude underlying the bias.

## MENSTRUAL TABOOS BY RELIGION

The views of religions like Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Sikhism are as discussed below.

### A. Hinduism

Most scriptures treat menstruation as '*asaucha*' or impure. A menstruant (menstruating woman) is generally considered as 'impure' for 3 days, she becomes 'pure' on the ritual bathing of the 4<sup>th</sup> day. During these 3 days, women are impure and capable of polluting even by their shadow. Menstruating women are forbidden from participating



in religious and death rituals, touching sacred objects, entering any space which is demarcated as sacred as the altar or temples. She is isolated either in seclusion huts or rooms.

Sexual intercourse with the husband is strictly forbidden. The clothes which is used during menstruation are also impure. She cannot enter the kitchen nor cook for herself as she may contaminate the food. Food items used for storage such as spices, pickles, food grains should be kept away from the shadow of the menstruant as the food items will spoil.

Nithin Sridhar in his series of articles on the Hindu View of Menstruation<sup>1</sup> explored the alternative view of menstruation as time for rest and of divinity. Some thinkers believe these restrictions were imposed in lieu of offering rest to the woman. Some hold during menstruation a woman is so pure during menstruation that she should not be touched in order to maintain that state. However these views did not gain wide acceptance as the opinion of menstruant as a pollutant.

## **B. Judaism**

In Judaism a menstruant is described as 'Niddah'.<sup>2</sup> It is perceived as a state of impurity and pollution.

Torah says the menstruant remains unclean for 7 days and is purified after a ritual bath. During niddah is she capable of polluting anyone who comes in contact with her hence must be secluded. She was then required to make an offering of two doves and two pigeons to the priest. He would offer it to the altar and pray that her uncleanliness is atoned.

Sexual intercourse with a niddah is strictly prohibited. A husband cohabiting with his niddah wife can be punished by flogging.

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<sup>1</sup> Sridhar Nithin, <http://indiafacts.org/hindu-view-menstruation-vi-menstruation-restrictions-attitudes/#1>

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Niddah>



## C. Christianity

Christianity shares roots with Judaism hence in the older times there is a confluence of Jewish teachings on Christianity.

Leviticus refers to menstruation as “infectious time”<sup>3</sup>. It says anyone touching her or having sexual intercourse with her is liable to be banished for a stipulated time. They were not allowed to enter or even pass by places of worship. The Old Testament also calls it as the “Curse of Eve”<sup>4</sup>. She received it as punishment when she tempted Adam to eat the fruit from the Forbidden tree, from whence it continually passes to other women.

Christ however did not accept these taboos. It is noted that he allowed himself to be touched by a woman who was a menstruant.

In the Middle Ages, men were warned of coitus with menstruant as it could lead to children with physical deformities or leprous. Women were not allowed to receive communion during their menses. Menstruation is the main reason for forbidding women from occupying any place in the ministry.

In the contemporary times the Church has softened its stand on these issues. In the Handbook of Theology by David Prummer, holds that "involuntary pollution in the menstrual period does not render the body so unclean as to prevent the receiving of Holy Communion."<sup>5</sup>

## D. Islam

Menstruation in Islam is known as *hayz*. The *Sharia* believes menstrual blood to be impure but the woman who is menstruating can lead a normal life.

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<sup>3</sup> Selvidge, M. (1984). Mark 5:25-34 and Leviticus 15:19-20: A Reaction to Restrictive Purity Regulations. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 103(4), 619-623.

<sup>4</sup> Phipps, W. (1980). The Menstrual Taboo in the Judeo-Christian Tradition. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 19(4), 298-303

<sup>5</sup> Ibid



Certain acts were forbidden to the woman who is menstruating as offering prayers which involve prostration, entering or keeping any object in the mosque, touching the Holy Quran as the words of Allah cannot be touched by anyone who is unclean. Women are forbidden to have sexual intercourse with their husband as they experience discomfort during the flow and require rest.

Prophet Muhammad is said to have encouraged menstruating women to be present during Eid festivities. He once allowed his wife to serve him drink who was menstruating.

### **E. Sikhism**

Sikhism treats women and men as equal before God. Menstruation is perceived as something natural and hence beyond any condemnation.

Guru Nanak was critical of the menstrual taboos by other religion and strongly criticized any such views. He focused on mental purity rather than the physical. Women are not impure because of menstruation. Menstruation is positive as it signifies fertility and birth. It is God given and cannot be impure. A menstruating women can go to the Gurudwara and offer prayers.

### **CONCLUSION:-**

Certain similarities and differences can be observed in the above. Except Sikhism, the other religions endorse menstrual taboos. Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam believe that the menstruant is impure during her menses. Hinduism and Judaism are rigid about separating the menstruant during the flow as she can 'pollute' others. Classical Christianity under the influence of Old Testament believes in the notion of 'pollution'. Contemporary Christianity does not endorse these views being influenced by modern sciences. Islam does not recommend isolation of menstruating women in secular wife. It treats menstruation as natural but does not permit the menstruant near any holy place or sacred objects. Women have been excluded from occupying any important positions in the clergy because their bodies are 'unclean' or 'polluted'.



Patricia Crawford opines, “Explanations of menstruation have been constructed in terms of female inferiority and how these explanations in turn were used to justify women’s inferior position in the society.”<sup>6</sup> In the same article, she mentions physiologists over the years believed in various menstrual taboos as menstruation was “Monthly flux of Excrementitious and Unprofitable Blood”<sup>7</sup>, indicator of women’s inferiority besides others.

Deeper reflection reveals a systematic marginalization of women by a particular model of society viz patriarchy. Women’s body is viewed as inferior as compared to males. Any issuances from the woman’s body are hence treated as polluting and impure. These attitudes in turn influenced the way man looked at God. God could not be woman but had to be a male. This is also proved by the masculine pronouns most religions use in reference to the divine. In certain religions there is an acknowledgement of the feminine divine but one need to investigate if that has uplifted the status of women following it.

In contemporary times many movements have come to counter this misogyny as Feminist Theology, Body Theology etc. These movements seek to interpret the Divine in feministic terms and to uphold the dignity and honour of women’s bodies.

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<sup>6</sup> Crawford, P. (1981). Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England. *Past & Present*, pg 48

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, pg 49



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