

Representation of the Female Body in the Advertisements of Menstrual Products

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Abstract

The female body, since ages has been subjected to numerous socio-cultural practices pertaining to the respective geographical and social settings. A woman's position and role is constructed by the society on the basis of her 'body'. It is often considered as a tool/ text of representation of the differences of social and cultural identities thereby making it a site of meaning generation for various cultural values. With the advent of popular culture, there arose another arena of objectification of female body. The representation of female bodies in various sources of popular culture such as films, songs, advertisements, fashion etc. is often steeped with the stereotypical ideas of women's bodies constructed by patriarchy. The advertisement of menstrual products is the most popular source of dissemination of cultural values concerning menstruation and menstruating female bodies in the contemporary world. Menstruation since ages has been associated with a sense of shame and stigmatized as something dirty and impure. The silence on this issue since time immemorial is seen to be broken by these advertisements on menstrual products but the contents or theme adopted in these ads tend to contradict this notion. Instead of breaking the silence and stigma, the ads promote concealment of menstrual existence through their products. This paper is aimed at analyzing the role of menstrual products advertisements in objectifying female body in the contemporary societies. .

Keywords: Advertisement; Commercialization; Female body; Menstruation; Menstrual products.

Introduction

Women, since time immemorial have been subjected to innumerable conventions and customs created by the patriarchy on the basis of their bio-

logical formation. Often associated with the idea of beauty, grace, honour, morality, women's bodies are foregrounded as sites of discourses pertaining to one's tradition and culture. It is often observed that the society holds separate roles for boys as well as girls thereby determining the idea of masculinity and femininity. Mary Wollstonecraft in her influential work(1792), "*A Vindication on the Rights of Women*", writes, "To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped with worse than Chinese bands, and the sedentary life which they are condemned to live, whilst boys frolic in the open air, weakens the muscles ... artificial notions of beauty, and false descriptions of sensibility have been early entangled with her motives of action." (p. 45). The patriarchy has played a significant role in the construction of the gendered body based on the biological formation and these gendered bodies act in terms of their distinctive behaviors, language, dress, emotions and physical appearance. Since body and its implication play a vital role in the construction of gender, menstruation is one of the most significant factors in this process. As Fingerson in *Girls in Power: Gender, Body and Menstruation in Adolescence* (2006) writes, "It is through social interactions and society's belief systems that we gender our bodies. Girls' bodies are designated female in part because of their experience of menstruation. Boys' bodies are designated male in the absence of the experience of menstruation. Menstruation is a gendered phenomenon: as teens understand and interpret menstruation, so do they understand and interpret gender and gender expectations." (p. 78)

Moreover, the French feminist Helen Cixous in her famous essay "*The Laugh of Medusa*", questions the rigid conventions of the societal construct and the differentiation between man's body and that of a female. She points out, "We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty, we've been made victims of the old fool's game: each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you'll give me mine." (Cixous, 1976, p. 885) Menstruation is an indispensable part of a female body which has its physiological and psychological implications in a woman's life and determines her position in the society. As Dean Joan writes, "menstrual blood is the linchpin of both the Hippocratic and Aristotelian theories on how women differed from men." (Joan, 1994, p. 225) While in the ancient period, the Greek philosophers, Aristotle and Hippocrates defined women's bodies to be inferior to that of men, in the medieval period too menstruation was considered poisonous and dirty and so was a menstruating female body. As quoted in Victoria Louise Newton's book, *Everyday Discourses on Menstruation: Cultural and Social Perspectives*, "The Book of

Leviticus taught that menstruation made women 'unclean' and that their menstrual blood was a sign of moral as well as physical impurity. This impurity was considered to be contagious, and anyone coming into contact with it was in need of 'cleansing'..."(Newton 2016, p. 20) In the succeeding years, the theories related to menstruation seemed to echo the ancient beliefs and practices concerning menarche and female body. While puberty was considered important for a woman, the idea of impurity was always attached to it. Various theories on menstruation were propounded in the eastern societies too. In *The Sabrimala Confusion: Menstruation Across Culture* published in 2019 by Nithin Sridhar, it is observed in the book that while the Hindu societies believed in its significance and considered it as a period of rest, austerity and self-purification and therefore a menstruating woman should refrain from the regular domestic activities. However, the menstrual blood was considered unclean and dirty.

In Islam, the Quran does not exclude menstruating women from performing religious activities. Celene Ayat Lizzio states, "The Qur'an does not specify the exclusion of females from any pillars (akran) of ritual devotion." (Lizzio 2013, p. 172) However, in due course of time, there developed various ideas and theories on menstruation and thus it came to be believed that if a menstruating woman performs any religious acts, it would be considered as contempt of God.

Menstruation is one of the most common factors that form the basis of the socio-cultural position of woman as the subjugated 'other'. Although each community has its own belief system concerning menstruation, the shame and stigma have been integral to the ideas of menstruating female body. There has always been a conscious attempt on the part of every woman to conceal it from the male counterpart for it has always been defined as a bizarre feminine issue. As Iris Marion Young in her essay "Menstrual Meditations" writes, "...from our earliest awareness of menstruation until the day we stop, we are mindful of the imperative to conceal our menstrual process. We follow a multitude of practical rules. Do not discuss your menstruation... leave no bloodstains on the floor, towels, sheets, or chairs. Make sure that your bloody flow does not visibly leak through your clothes, and do not let the outline of a sanitary pad show" (Young, 2005, p. 106-107)

However, it is observed in recent years that menstruation has come out of the age old barriers constructed by superstitions and ignorance and has become manageable for women with the help of various sanitary products available in the market. Yet, the shame and taboos attached to it have

thrived till today. In spite of the fact that it is a feminine issue, it is always perceived from the patriarchal perspective. With the growing number of women in the workplaces, there is again a constant effort to hide the existence of menstruation not for the shame but for the fear of being considered weaker than men. Many women even reject the idea of menstrual leave as it may lead the society to consider women weaker than men for men do not need any such menstrual leave. Christine M. Power in her thesis writes, "Under false consciousness women have been influenced and manipulated by men's power to define women and their actions in ways that ensures male superiority. Thus, contemporary menstrual management suggests that women must act as if they are not menstruating, even when they do have their periods." (Power , 1996, p. 10)

One of the most popular factors reflecting the patriarchal perspective on menstruation in the contemporary commercial world is the advertisement of menstrual products. Advertisements, an important branch of popular culture has played a significant role in the objectification of menstruating women. With the development in the industrial world, a variety of menstrual products have been made available in the market. However, the representation of women in these ads seems to echo the age-old idea of menstruation being dirty, stinking and thus needs concealment. Most of the ads present women as passive, weak and always in dread of being discovered with menstrual stains. Emerged in the 1920s, the disposable pads, no doubt played a significant role in the field of menstrual hygiene. These disposable pads accompanied with the advertisers and profit-making companies in the pursuit of making profit, however, have failed break the taboos associated with menstruation. Even though the concepts in these ads kept on changing with the changing commercial scenario, the idea behind all these ads in all these years seemed to have changed very little.

As Christine M Power writes, "While the ads may seem to break the silence that surrounds menstruation, ironically, they insure female subordination" (Power, 1996, p. 21). It is noteworthy that not only menstrual products but most of the beauty products are advertised in a way that promotes the stereotypical idea of female body thereby commodifying the same in the capitalist world. However, what makes these advertisements from that of the menstrual products is the objectification of female body as impure and the phenomenon as a social taboo. The irony lies in the fact that the presentation of these products seems to be breaking the taboos associated with the phenomenon but in reality it does highlight the age-old concept about menstrual blood as something dirty and impure. The ads on television and other such platforms seem to break the silence

on menstruation through the beautiful and attractive taglines but the primary objective of these products is to ensure concealment of menstrual blood. Emma Barnett writes, "It's the periods brands telling women to 'shh' and 'whisper' about their periods. That they smell and so we need flowery chemical scents down there. The companies create adverts which show a thick blue liquid instead of dark viscous blood, and which feature women skipping about in skin-tight white pants while happily eating a yoghurts, smiling breezily as their body easily takes the waves of pain and blood raining down into their teeny tiny pants." (Barnett 2019, p.145)The themes adopted in most of commercial ads focus on the women's body which become dirty and stinky during menstruation and thus encourage them to use the respective products for a carefree periods. For example, in an advertisement of *Whisper*, a brand of sanitary napkins, a school girl wearing a white uniform and a blazer around her skirt is portrayed to be on her periods. The act wearing her blazer around her white skirt is indicative of her attempt of hide the menstrual stain if she accidentally gets the same. This is a clear spectacle of the shame ingrained in girls concerning their menstruation. Moreover, the tagline "Ab kadam barhaye ja" ("Whisper Ultra non-woven" 0: 20) in the ad depicts the fact that menstruation is believed to be restrictive for women in many ways and using the pads will enable them to move forward.

Moreover, the product's name "Whisper" itself is suggestive of the silence prevailed in terms of menstruation. Similarly, the commercial ad of another brand, *Sofy* portrays a working woman on her periods and thus is passive and nervous to come closer to her colleagues especially, the men, for she is afraid of stinking and getting stained. However, using *Sofy* pads gives her "confidence to get close, closer, closest" ("*Sofy* Sanitary Pads advertisements 2016" 0:27). Adding fragrance along with softness is another significant marketing policy that the advertiser targets to increase the demand of their product. *Stayfree* too focuses on the protection from stains and leakage and helps the menstruating girl to hide her periods. Behind the manufacturing and marketing of menstrual products, there lie the shame and silencing of menstruation prevalent in our societies since ages. The advertisements tend to remind the girl of the risks of physical activity which might lead to leakage and odor, the ultimate solution of which is the advertised sanitary pad or tampons. The message behind all these ads is that menstruation is something that every woman tries to conceal and these sanitary products help them to do so. As observed by Power in her essay "The Construction of Menstrual Product Advertisements from a Feminine Perspective", female audience is targeted by the advertisers while the patriarchal voice instructs women on the primary

etiquettes to be followed during menstrual flow. She writes that women "... understand that being discovered as having one's period is not acceptable. Not only must women not speak of their periods, they must also ensure that anything related to their periods is not seen. Menstrual management products must be hidden at all times." (Power, 1996, p. 26) Another stereotyped representation of menstruation in advertisements is the use of blue liquid instead of red. The fact that the advertisers prefer to use blue liquid in the advertisements proves that the sight of menstrual blood is still a taboo and thus should never be seen. These advertisements thus are instrumental in injecting a stereotyped idea of menstruation into the young minds that seem to be the prime targets of the advertisers. The concepts undertaken by various ad agencies seem to aimed at easing the experiences of menstruation but it might not be wrong to say that in reality these advertisements end up reiterating the stigma of menstruation. Although in recent times, a number of voluntary social organizations have come up with various eco-friendly and natural reusable products which are safer than those commercial products, but only a handful of women are able to avail the benefits. These seems no capitalist representation of these products which leads to the perpetuation of the stereotypical idea of female body.

Conclusion

From the above discussions, it is inferred that the female body has become an object in the world of commercial advertisements. The representations of menstruating body and its needs echo the age-old definition of menstruation as dirty and impure. The irony lies in the fact that these advertisements instead of breaking the menstrual taboos promote silencing and concealment of the same. The ads in one way or other, give the audience the message that menstruation is odorous and difficult to manage which however, can be made easier through the menstrual products available in the market. These products no doubt have been helpful for women but have failed to break the stigma associated with menstruation. In other words, the advertisements have earned huge profit by selling their products at the cost of female bodies being objectified. Although in recent years, a change can be noticeable in the perspectives towards menstruation, there is a long way to go in bringing a kind of period pride among every menstruating woman.

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