



## Menstruation: Myths, Mythology and Taboos in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*

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### Introduction

This world has always belonged to males, and none of the reasons given for this has ever seemed sufficient. By reviewing prehistoric and ethnographic data in the light of existentialist philosophy, we can understand how the hierarchy of the sexes came to be.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Chitralekha Banerjee, 1956) is a famous Indian American author who has gained reputation in the literary world as a poet, short story writer, novelist and essayist. She is an award-winning and best-selling author and teacher of writing. Her work has been published in over 50 magazines, including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *The New Yorker*, and her writing has been included in over 50 anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories*, the *O. Henry Prize Stories* and the *Pushcart Prize Anthology*. Her books have been translated into 29 languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Bengali, Russian and Japanese, and many of them have been made into films and plays. Divakaruni has autobiographical elements in most of her works.

### Myths, Mythology and Taboos

*The Palace of Illusions* is a retelling of the world-famous Indian Epic, *Mahabharata* from its most dynamic and leading female character Draupadi also named Panchali. Divakaruni exhibits her expertise in the depiction of this epic by employing various myths, historical facts and mysticism in her novel. She was born out of the fire and a prophecy was made that she would be the reason for a great change in the general course of history. She gets married to five Pandava brothers. As of history Draupadi always assisted her husbands in their quest to attain their father's kingdom which was taken up by their uncles. She always remained with her husbands in their tough times to say in their exile. She was very close to Lord Krishna who was her childhood friend and had supported her through the thick and thin of their life. She had a secret attraction for Karna, the staunch enemy of her husbands. This lovely epic told from the female's perspective gives it a new dimension and raises many questions about the societal norms of the patriarchal world.

Draupadi or Panchaali was the leading female character in the ancient Indian epic, *The Mahabharata* but in *The Palace of Illusions*, she takes centre stage and narrates the story of her being and existence. Draupadi was a loyal wife to the five heroic Pandava brothers. Prince Arjun wins her in the *Swaymvar* organised by King Drupad, the father of Draupadi. When these Pandavas get back home, they ask their mother to see what they have got and the mother Kunti without looking instructs her sons to divide 'it' among themselves. This episode was quite depressing as the obedient sons could not even say 'no' to the order of their mother. Again, a prejudice is reflected in this episode where the mother holds authority over her son's lives whereas the newly wedded bride has no voice to speak for herself. This very episode can be compared with Elleke Boehmer's doubly or triply marginalization of females in a post-colonial society where females are dominated by males.

By contrast, native or subaltern women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender but also of race, social class and in some cases, religion, caste, sexuality and regional status. (Boehmer, 215)

In the *Mahabharata*, the day on which the Pandavas lost the game of dice to the Kauravas Draupadi was menstruating and that is why she was just staying away from the household responsibilities and was enjoying her own company.

In ancient times, women were not allowed to go into the kitchen and were not allowed to do any household chores as their bodies required some rest during this period.

"It was my time of the month, which made me lethargic. Dressed in light cotton that a trader had brought from Bengal, I drowsed in the soft sunlight at my window, listening to the mynahs calling in the garden, feeling calmer than I had in a while." (Divakaruni, 25)

The famous preacher Sadhguru also says that that's the time when she needs to be cared for, protected, and taken care of. But over a while somebody makes this a discriminatory process, we are born from that, if that is impure our very birth is impure and the creation is impure.

He was further asked about the reasons for the prejudices against menstruation in spirituality. On this, he replies that there is no mention of the menstrual cycle anywhere. He says that these are a physiological issue which reflects a psychological factor in a certain segment of women. A substantial segment of women finds a reflection of their physiological process in their psychological makeup, which is a fact that has to be taken care of. If this is being said only because some temples and other things have said women cannot enter at that time, one needs to understand, where this comes from.

He also says that today's women are equipped and capable of handling their bodily needs and things are a different matter. A thousand years ago they did not have good sanitary facilities. In those days women had a tremendous number of physical activities. So, the woman who is going through a certain process of her cycle gets a break from everything for three days. It was a wonderful thing for her. That used to be the time when somebody else cooked and served her. She used to sit alone by herself meditating, singing and praying. It was a good way of protecting women.

Out of sheer ignorance, people made this a discriminatory process. We are born from that process and if that is impure our very birth is impure and the creation is impure. Women were given rest during those days but people manipulated it and started treating them with contempt.

There are many other myths also related to menstruation. One of those is the restrictions to going to the temples while the women are menstruating. The Sabarimala incident which took place in the year 2019 sparked the debate on the issue of women visiting the temples during menstruation. Activist Trupti Desai with the members of the Bhumata Brigade raised the issue that women of all age groups should be allowed to visit the temples. There should not be any discrimination based on gender.

Sinu Joseph in his book *Science Behind Restrictions: Women and Sabarimala* talks about the science behind the restrictions on women from entering such temples. He tells us that Sabarimala is associated with the *ajna chakra*, which is the command centre of the mind. It is here that the command of the Guru (ajna) is received from above. Gaining control over this *chakra* means one becomes like a *Brahmachari*. Alternatively, one practising Brahmacharya will have an active *ajna chakra*. The *Ajna chakra* is associated with great intellect, intelligence and natural leadership skills. All spiritual leaders whose mere presence will draw crowds are classic examples of those active *Ajna chakras*.

Spaces such as Sabarimala work primarily on the *Ajna chakra*. For women, if the *ajna chakra* alone is energized and if *swadisthana* and *muladhara* are not efficiently active, the ovaries will eventually become dysfunctional and unable to convert testosterone into female hormones. Some of the symptoms of excess testosterone in females include excessive facial hair (Hirsutism), deepened masculine voice and difficulty reproducing owing to disorders such as Polycystic Ovarian Symptom (PCOS) and Polycystic Ovarian Disorder (PCOD).

Further, a dominant *ajna chakra* will alter the internal *doshas* and the functions they govern. For women with a dominant *ajna chakra*, the downward flowing *apana vayu*, which causes menstrual blood to flow down and out, will be altered, causing difficulty in menstruation. Over a while, such alteration of the subtle bodily forces could result in a reversal in the direction of *apana vayu* causing retrograde menstruation in disorders such as endometriosis.

These are some of the reasons given by Joseph to those who have asked the question "Why are women in the menstrual age restricted from entering Sabarimala?"

## Conclusion

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that Hindu mythology does not talk about women being impure in those difficult days rather they were allowed to brood over their things and could get some rest but the patriarchal society modified this boon into a bane for the women. It is painful to say that the notions existing in the pre-Vedic era have undergone a tremendous change that too for the worse and is still existing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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