

How can a focus on 'the body' illuminate our understanding of power dynamics?

'The body' in and of itself can create and be subject to differentiating power dynamics. A key example of this is the suppression and objectification of the female body within patriarchal societies. This essay will attempt to show how a focus on the female body can illuminate our understanding of gender inequalities and the problems women have cross-culturally whilst being subject to gender suppression. For example, this essay will look at ethnographic studies of menstrual taboos, the woman's body and reproduction and the controversial case of female genital mutilation. By illuminating these topics, it can be argued that this will allow for a greater understanding of the female body in a patriarchal world and the trials that women across cultures face every day.

Menstrual taboos and the view of a woman's period as contaminating and polluting is a common and widespread belief amongst many cultures. Even with the emergence of women's rights across 'global north' societies, a woman's menstrual cycle is still subject to gender suppression for millions across the globe and notably is a driving factor for creating differentiating power dynamics between males and females across many cultures, communities and societies. For example, in namely Islamic countries, it is common knowledge that a menstruating female is usually shunned from their communities and put into isolation for the duration of her period, because of the fear and view of menstrual blood being ultimately 'dirty' or 'impure' and therefore dangerous and contaminating to the male. In 2015 under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), it was pledged that menstruation taboos would be addressed amongst developing countries. In a paper written using ethnographic evidence within India, menstruation was labeled the 'forgotten reproductive right' and as 'a serious development problem... a violation of human rights that perpetuates women subordination' (Karki and Espinosa, 2018). The paper explores also the cause and effect of restrictions on women's menstrual rights and the suppression in turn women face from men who are biologically held in authoritative positions as a result. 'These views, norms and practises reinforce negative perceptions about the female body that maintain patriarchal subordination of women and girls' (Karki and Espinosa, 2018). It is the suggestion that a woman's biological and bodily functions, which cannot be helped, is the foundation for oppressive behaviour that has been apparent across history and is still widely experienced today. The woman's body therefore, is subject to a level of control and power held by men.

In 'A Cross-cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, and related social variables' (1974), Rita E. Montgomery examines the origins, psychological, biological

and social factors for the believed reasons as to why menstruation is negatively viewed in certain cultures. Montgomery's paper draws upon various studies and arguments put forward to explain as to why the cultural phenomena of menstrual taboos not only exist but as to how this therefore creates power inequalities between men and women. One argument put forward by Stephens (1962) argues that the female period is widely viewed as 'inconvenient to the smooth, day to day functioning' (Montgomery, 1974, p.147) of societies. This argument suggests that the nature of having a menstrual cycle can be attributed to the reasons as to why traditionally men hold more powerful positions in the workplace and within society. Similar to arguments made that pregnancy and childbirth is seen as inefficient to the smooth running of a company due to the much needed maternity leave of women, this argument also suggests that the glass ceiling exists for the woman because of the 'problems' of a period. For example, women may need time off in extreme cases due to pain or menstrual complications and it can be argued by some that work is not as fast or efficient when a woman experiences their period. Stephens argues that this could be why traditionally men are given more power in society and why menstrual cycles are given such taboos. If these perceptions were to be debunked and a woman was given more recognition and power for the role she can actually perform in society then, Stephens argument suggests that, 'the more important and necessary women's work, the fewer would be the taboos' (Montgomery, 1974, p.147). This argument puts the point across that menstrual taboos can be seen as an excuse for the creation and existence of a patriarchal society because of the fear that a woman's period may not be positively functional in the running of a workplace. Formed in 1962, this argument can very much now be seen as outdated as more and more women are now breaking through the glass ceiling, that a patriarchal society for so long had held above them; however it can still be argued that because of the pre-existing taboos of menstruation, women may still suffer with the gender suppression that is still apparent within society today.

Young and Bacdayan (1965) labels menstrual taboos as 'institutionalized discrimination against females imposed by males' (Montgomery, 1974, p.148). Their argument suggests that it is because of gender separation through male solidarity that has ultimately led to a lack of communication between men and women. The lack of open discussion about periods therefore, they argue, has led to little understanding on the men's behalf of the nature of the menstrual cycle which has reinforced a negative perspective. '...menstrual taboos are simply an aspect of general structural rigidity and that the latter variable subsumes all the attitudes and internalized tendencies associated with rigidity' (Young and Bacdayan, 1965, p.233). This argument builds upon the foundation of gender separation and argues that it is the separation of man and woman that is the cause of, therefore, the taboo existing. However, this argument is flawed in

the way that it can be argued that in fact, a pre-existing menstrual taboo may actually itself be the cause of gender separation. Currently also, in global north societies, there is less of a gender divide than in the time of Young and Bacdayan's (1965) argument, due to being written in the 1960s, and yet many women would still argue that even though it is more openly discussed, the topic of the female period still makes men uncomfortable and can still be ridiculed and used as a tool within certain cultures for men to impose power and authority over women.

In a further argument put forth by Ashley Montagu (1952), it is suggested that menstruation is purposefully 'handicapped' in a patriarchal society. This is because of the fact that men cannot fulfill the same reproductive functions that women can and in turn are subconsciously 'jealous' as a collective because of the meaningful power attributed to a woman's body as being able to grow and sustain a life. Bettelheim (1954) names this notion as 'vagina envy' (derived from Freud's 'Penis envy') (Bettelheim, 1954). He suggests that menstruation and female reproductive functions as a whole are 'biologically dramatic' and in turn gives women a more grounded sense of being as the female body can fulfill the full role of reproduction whilst men can only contribute their part. '...her readiness to fulfill a role in child-bearing is indicated by the onset of menstruation. Female initiation rites are usually conducted in response to this biological signal, while men depend on social convention to determine the time of their entry into manhood' (Montgomery, 1974, p.150). Using this argument, it can therefore be argued that patriarchy exists because men had to feel functional and as if they had a role to fulfill in society to make up for the fact that are not child bearers and the essential part to procreation. Montagu therefore believes that because of the 'vagina envy', males within society try to control this power held by women by essentially turning the notion of menstruation and childbearing into a disability as a means of becoming if not the same, but perhaps more powerful to satisfy their feelings of unfulfillment and unaccomplishment. 'If one happens to be lacking in certain capacities with which the opposite sex is naturally endowed, and those capacities happen to be highly, if unacknowledgedly, valued, then one can compensate for one's own deficiency by devaluating the capacities of others' (Montagu, 1952, p.18). Furthermore, 'by turning capacities into handicaps, not only can one make their possessors feel inferior, but anyone lacking such capacities can then feel superior for very lack of them' (Montagu, 1952, p.18). Therefore, It is because of the 'vagina envy', that men often make menstruation and the female reproductive role as taboo because society was built on a need of control on the men's behalf as they latch onto any means of power or authority that give them a pivotal functional sense of achievement.

Oppression of the female body to create power dynamics within a community is a notion that has existed throughout history and is apparent not just in the 'global north or south' but within some Indigenous societies as well. J.C. Goodale's fieldwork conducted with the Kaulong Tribe between 1962 and 1974 is substantial ethnographic evidence of a patriarchal society driven by gender separation with what could be notably seen as 'extreme' views of menstruation. In the Kaulong, 'men feared, and regularly postponed, marriage until late in life (sometimes forever), sexual intercourse was considered a statement of marriage for both men and women (and rarely occurred outside of marriage traditionally), and contamination from women was believed to lead to certain chronic illness and eventually to early death for men' (Goodale, 1980, p.119). Goodale found that this contamination according to the Kaulong is the menstrual flow. It is believed amongst the Kaulong that women are pollution when on their periods due to their 'increased intensity' (Goodale, 1980, 129). Because of this belief, the female's life becomes restricted and male and female interaction is non-existent during the duration of her period. For example, Goodale explains, 'a woman must remove herself from the bi-, stay clear of all gardens and dwelling places located there and all drinking water supplies and sources. She may not touch anything with which a man may come in contact... periodic total isolation of the woman is the most efficient means of control' (Goodale, 1980, p.129). The words that Goodale uses such as 'contaminating' or 'polluting' attaches within itself negative connotations to the female period and paints them as 'dirty' or 'impure.' This belief holds a powerful shift in dynamics to the extent that a woman on her period, which is natural and biologically necessary, can not be around men and the rest of her community because of the fear she could infect them. This reinforces limitations upon a woman's life and similarly to how people stay away from medical infections or diseases, this belief suggests that a menstruating woman is no better and should be avoided. From a global north perspective, this isolation and shunning of menstruating women may be seen as another example of gender suppression and a violation of human rights, however another perspective surrounding cultural relativism can be of importance here. Throughout this essay so far, it has been shown that a menstruating woman is often taboo because she is lesser than the man especially when on her period. The gender separation may reinforce the ideals of a patriarchal society to a global northern eye but a point must be made that to the communities themselves, menstrual taboos may not always be negatively coincided with men obtaining control and power over women. It can be argued that to some cultures a woman on her period is seen as so powerful (in terms of spiritually or energetically), that she can't be around certain religious rituals or around others, in order to protect her. Within certain religious communities or groups who indulge in spirituality or cosmologies, it is sometimes believed that a woman's energy is so heightened on her period that she cannot be around other energies because many

communities believe in spiritual balance. With this belief, this doesn't diminish the woman but more so empowers her which creates a contrasting argument that not all menstrual taboos exist to oppress women under patriarchal belief systems.

Another example of female suppression of the body within patriarchal cultures is the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). FGM can take the form of several different types of procedures but usually involves the cutting away of the clitoris, labia and in extreme cases the sealing of the vagina as well, leaving a little incision for the passing of menstrual blood and urine (WHO, 2018). The World Health Organization (WHO) describes FGM as 'a violation of the human rights of girls and women' (WHO, 2018) and exemplifies it as a leading form of discrimination from the patriarchy; 'It reflects deep-rooted inequality between the sexes, and constitutes an extreme form of discrimination against women' (WHO, 2018). In 1982, Janice Boddy published an ethnographic study of her time in the Muslim village 'Hofriyat' in Sudan. In her ethnography she gives a detailed description of a FGM procedure which she witnessed on a young girl. She writes, 'a dozen hands push me forward. "You've got to see this up close", says Zaineb, "it's important." I dare not confess my reluctance' (Boddy, 1982, p.683). Boddy notes how no men were present during the procedure and seems taken back by the attitudes of the village women who she writes as after the procedure 'briefly trill their joyous ululation' (Boddy, 1982, p.683) before celebrating with tea. Boddy also herself explains her surprising detachment from the situation of which she writes before that she had been dreading. 'Yet my virtual lack of emotional reaction... horrified me than the circumcisions themselves' (Boddy, 1982, p.684). It seems that Boddy adopts the attitude carried amongst every other villager, an attitude of 'it is what it is.' Boddy goes on to explore the reasons as to why this seems to be a pressing ritual for every young girl within the village. One reason she records is that is commonly believed that circumcision will make a woman more sexually desirable and attractive to a man. Already, her findings suggest that the use of FGM is to satisfy the men and holds little importance for the woman; another example of a patriarchal society suppressing women. Another reason is that circumcision is said to ensure the virginity of a woman before marriage as the main goal for a woman's life is to marry and carry a successful lineage and circumcision is found to be a tool in doing so. Hayes summarises this notion well, 'in Sudan, virgins are made, not born' (Hayes, 1975, p.622). Boddy's findings suggest that within this specific Sudanese culture, there is little recognition for the woman. She is to endure the initial pain and long lasting effects of FGM to satisfy a patriarchal ideology and any regards for her own sexual pleasure seems to be forgotten. Boddy found that for many women who had undergone FGM, sex could never be pleasurable; 'because they find it so painful, most of the women I talked to said that they avoid sex as much as possible' (Boddy, 1982, p.686). Boddy's study shows the

objectifying attitudes that women in certain cultures have to experience from men. It is an example of the dominance and power play of the patriarchy and is evidential in the fact that many cultures suppress the female body in order to surrender to the control of men.

Menstrual taboos, pregnancy prejudices and female genital mutilation are examples of how the woman's body is suppressed cross-culturally to serve the ideologies of men. By focusing on the female body, our understanding of what it means to be female in a predominantly patriarchal world is illuminated. The examples shown above gives reasoning to the cause and effect that in many cultures, the very nature of having a woman's body is often to experience the authoritative control of men. The female body is the basis for gender biding power inequalities between man and woman throughout history and globally. To this day, a focus on the female body is still a relevant and yet controversial subject as women still fight for gender equality in what has been traditionally, and in most cultures, an overruling, patriarchal society.

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