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Menstruation Products and Perceptions:
Breaking Through the Crimson Ceiling

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Abstract

This paper will examine different views on menstruation throughout history and their effects on social, political, and economic landscapes. The ancient Greeks, Romans, and Mayans all believed in the supposed ‘magical powers’ of menstrual blood. These societies held their own ideas on the limits of these magical abilities, and the good and evil forces they could be used for. Throughout these ancient societies, menstruation was used as a justification for the increased control of the state and men over women’s bodies. If menstrual blood did have these magical powers, it was a power that needed to be limited and controlled so as to not pose a threat to society. In Socialist Yugoslavia, the image of the female worker was celebrated. However, her menstruation and other aspects of her femininity had to be hidden. This led to the idea of an ideal woman being invisible. Colonization also led to the suppression of the menstrual practices and customs of many Indigenous peoples. Today, the stage of development of one’s home nation has a big impact on the accessibility of menstrual products and proper hygiene. Access to menstrual hygiene has also been linked to a woman’s ability to receive an education, and as a result, contribute more to the economy. In summary, society's views towards menstruation are linked to women's access to healthcare, employment, and educational opportunities. This is also connected to women’s general role in society. Menstruation is present in every time period and across every culture and is a powerful method of analysis for examining a society’s cultural, economic, and political spheres.

Introduction

"Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, [...] hives of bees die."¹ What vile substance could this mystery "it" be? Acid? Molten lava? Radioactive particles? Surprisingly, the answer is none of the above. The medium Pliny the Elder was referring to in his work *Natural History* published in 77 AD was actually menstrual blood. Views on menstruation and how it is handled across cultures and time are valid examples of world history because menstruation has been around for all of human history and is present across every culture and time period. This is significant because views on menstruation and access to menstruation products are linked to the overall health of women in a population, the opportunities, employment, and education women are given access to, as well as the general role of women in society. And the role of women in society is one of the biggest deciding factors in how society will function. As well as society's social, political, and economic landscapes. In this paper, the history of menstruation will be discussed through the chapters of ancient Greece, ancient Rome, ancient Maya civilization, Socialist Yugoslavia, and the Dakota Nation. As well as the effect of colonization on menstrual practices, modern-day views on menstruation, factors that can affect a menstruator’s experience, and the impact of menstrual practices on education and the economy. These chapters were chosen because they lay a good foundation for how menstruation was experienced cross-culturally in the ancient world, as well as today, and the

factors that affect how one experiences menstruation. Through discussing ancient Greece, Rome, and Mayan civilizations a groundwork is laid for menstruation practices in the ancient world. This also sets up cross-cultural comparisons and connections across space and time through similarities and differences in menstrual practices in the modern-day and ancient world. This idea of comparison is expanded upon by examining Socialist Yugoslavia, the effects of colonization on menstrual practices, modern-day views on menstruation, as well as the impact of development and socioeconomic class on access to menstrual hygiene.

Ancient Greece

In ancient Greece, menstruation was linked to spiritual powers, however, these were on the darker side. In ancient Greece, puberty was often linked with when a girl should get married and begin to reproduce. According to Hippocrates, menstruation could only safely begin when a girl was no longer a virgin.² Upon the first time having intercourse, her egress opened, opening a clear pathway for menstrual blood to flow out of the womb. If a girl's virginity was still intact upon her first period, the blood could not flow out and would gather in her heart and lungs. This would lead to the heart becoming sluggish, and eventually, insanity.³ This was a popular argument for why girls should get married around the beginning of puberty, if they waited too long to have intercourse, they would literally go insane.

The girls were said to go crazy from fevers and become murderous. The blood around their heart would cause them to try to choke themselves, and the poor condition of the blood would force evil upon the girls. Many of them experienced visions, often causing them to become suicidal. If they did not experience visions, they would develop a love for death. Sexual intercourse was the only thing that would cure them of this hysteria, and pregnancy would cure them for life. But those who remained virgins, would eventually give in to the suicidal visions and choke themselves to death.⁴

As soon as girls had their first period, they were able to and expected to have children, regardless of age. This could explain the violent "visions", many young girls had that encouraged them to take suicidal actions. Many girls, thirteen, fourteen years old, or younger, saw that they were expected to marry and have children with much older men. They were afraid and did not want to do this, and they saw death as their only escape from this fate. The high rate of suicidal young girls in ancient Greece may not be due to virgins experiencing hysteria and visions, but simply their rejection of the cultural norms that expected them to have and raise children as soon

as they were able to. “If suicide was common for girls at this transitional age, a possible explanation is the cultural norms and expectations created so much anxiety that they saw no other solution. The girls were naive, scared, thus far exposed to very little outside of their father’s home, but already required to take on the responsibility of marriage and children.”⁵ The girls did not want to conform to society’s expectations that they get married and have children at such a young age, and often viewed death as their only escape from this fate.

Young women used to give offerings to goddesses such as Artemis in ancient Greece to try to prevent the start of their menstruation. The physician Galen from ancient Greece made a ground-breaking diagnosis when he diagnosed a young girl suffering from the usual signs of “hysteria”, with mental uneasiness instead of insanity.⁶ This was an idea that went against the beliefs of others such as Hippocrates. Hippocrates acknowledged that something must be happening internally for these girls to act this way, but Galen took it a step further and said that external and cultural factors can have an impact on one’s health. Modern society accepts that menstruation is impacted by physiological, cultural, and psychological factors, but this idea was considered absurd in ancient Greece.

Ancient Rome

Many menstrual practices in ancient Rome were similar, and not similar, to modern-day menstrual practices. Many practices such as using a piece of cloth to absorb menstrual blood are similar to modern-day menstrual practices like the use of maxi pads. However, the use of techniques such as ligatures to lessen menstrual bleeding and the belief of menstrual blood to have ‘magical powers’ seem archaic when compared to modern-day menstrual practices and beliefs around menstruation. In ancient Rome, both men and women wore loincloths⁷, called subligaculum. It is assumed that a small piece of cloth was placed in the subligaculum during menstruation to soak up the blood. Women would also apply ligatures⁸ to the groin and armpits in the event of heavy menstrual bleeding, to block off blood flow throughout the body. It was believed that menstruation was ridding the female body of excess fluids. Women were not allowed to enter temples during menstruation. Menstruation was just another tool used to reinforce state control over women's bodies by justifying the enactment of laws regarding what women could and could not do.⁹ Hippocrates' doctors and Herophilus' works had a significant impact on how women’s bodies in ancient Rome were viewed. They claimed that menstrual blood was a form of “female semen.”¹⁰ Women were valued for their ability to have children, so

menstruation was regarded as extremely feminine. According to Pliny the Elder, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, menstrual blood held outstanding powers with no limits.

Menstruating women could drive away natural catastrophes, “sour crops, wither fruits and vegetables, kill bees, drive dogs insane, dull the brightness of mirrors, blunt razors, turn linens black, and rust iron and bronze.”¹¹ No direct contact with menstrual blood was necessary for this, it was said that a menstruating woman could kill a plant just by looking at it.¹² Menstruating women were viewed as a threat to society. The reason this blood was not dangerous to women while inside them, was because menstrual blood flowed outwards, not inwards, therefore it was only dangerous to the “outside-body.”¹³

In the Greek world, women were excluded from certain religious settings. But this was not the case in the Roman world. As much as menstrual blood was feared, it was believed that its powers could also work for good, and cure many illnesses. Pliny the Elder stated that many illnesses were cured “by either the first sexual intercourse, or the first menstruation.”¹⁴ Because menstruation was so deeply intertwined with the idea of femininity, it was often more feared when it did not occur than when it did. In Greece, inscriptions were written around the entrances of sanctuaries to avoid any risk of pollution.¹⁵ Menstrual blood was viewed as a contaminating substance. However, in Rome, it was required that some priestesses performed daily rituals in holy areas of the city. They were not advised to stop performing these duties while menstruating.

Pliny the Elder was a Roman author and naturalist philosopher, who was a naval and army commander of the Roman Empire. He wrote the encyclopedia *Naturalis Historia*, which was later used as a model for other encyclopedias.¹⁶ He had mixed feelings about menstruation, often referring to it as the cause of problems, but also the solution to those problems. For instance, he stated that menstrual blood could dull and stain mirrors, but it could also be used to remove that same stain. He also referred to menstrual blood as *miraculum*, which meant wonder or curiosity and held a positive connotation.¹⁷ He stated that “many people report that such a dangerous substance can restore health.”¹⁸ He viewed menstrual blood as a powerful substance that could be used either for good or evil.

Menstrual blood was approved as a remedy by some Roman physicians. It was said to help contain swelling by making a liniment for gout and to relieve headaches when applied to the forehead.¹⁹ The philosopher Xenocrates advocated for the absorption of substances, including menstrual blood, to treat certain diseases. Menstrual blood was also believed to have some

magical powers and was used by sorcerers and magicians in spells. Pliny the Elder also thought that thresholds that had been in contact with menstrual blood were protected against supernatural danger.

Menstruation represented a woman's ability to replenish the citizen body. And this was of the utmost importance in ancient Rome. It was believed that women could not be healthy without having children, and to have children, one needs to menstruate. Women were expected to use the powers associated with their menstruation to benefit Roman society as a whole, and nothing more. But because menstrual blood was believed to have these extreme powers, it was viewed as a threat to patriarchal authorities. If not controlled, it would undermine the entire social order of ancient Rome. This justified men's control over women because if left unchecked, their "powers" could cause absolute chaos. Therefore, menstruation had to be hidden to not pose a constant threat to society.

In a ceremony designed to protect seeds from pests, a menstruating girl had to walk around a field three times. The girl was also required to have her hair untied and her breasts exposed during this ritual.²⁰ This ritual illustrates how women's behavior could be monitored at all times, anyone could see the girl walking around the field. Clothing was also regulated as a way to either suppress or encourage a woman's power. Women's clothing in ancient Rome was based on their social status. Powerful bodies were to be hidden from sight. However, this rule was reversed during religious ceremonies. High-status women's hair was loosened and feet were revealed in rituals to make it rain. Nudity was almost a prerequisite in rituals that activated the "female powers." The uses of menstrual blood and the female body were always supervised, and almost entirely activated in sacred environments to contribute to the good of society.²¹

When menstrual blood was depicted as free-flowing and individualistic it was viewed as dangerous. Pliny the Elder once referred to menstrual blood as a "fatal poison to men."²² But, when the "powers" of menstrual blood were activated under strict male supervision for the betterment of the community, it was viewed in a positive light. When women were depicted as using these "powers" for their personal use, it was an abomination. However, when men used menstrual blood to make "love potions"²³ to control the process of conception, they were doing it for the betterment of society and this was seen as a positive action.

Such a powerful substance as menstrual blood had to be managed to produce the desired effects and prevent unwanted consequences for the community. As a result, menstrual blood

became another tool used to create rules controlling women's bodies and behaviors. Because men did not suffer from this same condition, they did not need to be supervised at all times, yet women did because they suffered from menstruation. The believed "powers" of menstrual blood illustrated the sacred value given to women's bodies in ancient Rome. But, menstruation was viewed as dangerous unless being harnessed for the well-being of the community. To prevent the "powers" of menstrual blood from targeting them, men had to come up with ideas such as these powers only being able to be released in certain environments and always under male supervision.

Ancient Maya Civilization

In ancient Maya civilization, menstruation was believed to have otherworldly powers as well. During menstruation, Mayan women were prohibited from entering sacred places and participating in rituals and other specific activities. Similar to the beliefs of the Romans, the Mayans believed that menstrual blood contained a "special spiritual energy."²⁴ These powers were potentially dangerous because menstruation is a kind of uncontrolled "bloodletting." This is the ritualized cutting or piercing of one's body. This blood could attract negative spiritual power or anger positive ones. The spilling of blood outside of rituals was highly unaccepted in Mayan society.²⁵ Menstruation was also associated with the lunar system. Mayan women had to be carefully supervised while menstruating so as to not attract any unwanted spiritual energy. However, punishment for not respecting the culture's rules around menstruation often came directly from the gods and not earthly beings.

During pregnancy, women were believed to have magical healing powers. It was said that if someone was to cut their finger, all a pregnant woman had to do was place a leaf over the wound and it would heal itself immediately.²⁶ However, there were negative powers associated with pregnancy as well. It was believed that the fetus in a pregnant woman's womb could bewitch an infant or small child. It was said that when a pregnant woman would walk by another woman with a child in her arms, the child would burst into tears. But, there was a protection against these powers. A solution of chili leaves and garlic would be washed on young children's heads to protect them from this bewitchment.²⁷

It was also said that every pregnant woman contained poison in her body and would strengthen the effects of poison in the body of a snake bite victim. If a pregnant woman entered the house of a snake bite victim, they were bound to die, unless she offered the victim a spoon of

ma'tz', a drink brewed from maize.²⁸ A woman's spouse was also affected by her pregnancy. It was said that he could not climb a tree during her pregnancy because that tree would never bear fruit again if he did. Pregnant women could also not enter caves, because if their spouse later entered that cave it would close around and swallow them whole. And if a pregnant woman even heard about the building of a new canoe, that canoe was destined to crack. As a result, the building of new canoes was always kept a secret from pregnant women.²⁹ It was believed that both pregnant and menstruating women held dangerous powers and were a potential threat to society, but pregnant women were viewed as the larger threat.

Socialist Yugoslavia

In Socialist Yugoslavia, menstruation was no longer believed to have paranormal powers, but there was still a taboo around discussing it in public. In her work *Female Trouble: Menstrual Hygiene, Shame and Socialism*³⁰ Polona Sitar explores menstruation in Socialist Yugoslavia. Menstrual pads and tampons first appeared on the Yugoslav market at the end of the 1960s. This was an era led by technological improvement, however, women were not generally thought of as users of technology, so menstrual products were not generally viewed as technologies. In Slovenia, socialism created a consumerist society, which encouraged the production of new and higher-quality goods, such as menstrual products. In a series of interviews conducted by Sitar, interviewees born prior to World War II often had the experience of making their own menstrual pads at home. These were rewashable and reusable, but often impractical and unsanitary. As often seen in developing countries, "the repeated use of unclean cloth and improper drying before reuse, however, has been suggested to have a potential to create a reservoir of microorganisms and spread of vaginal infections among adolescent girls."³¹ Homemade pads required extra work. They had to be made, washed, and dried in secret. The process of hiding any evidence of menstruation from the gaze of the public as well as male family members and children produced a sense of shame around menstruation. Menstruation was also regarded as shameful due to its connection to sexuality. Christianity held a lot of control over views on sexuality in socialist Slovenia. Values such as women's purity and obedience to men were emphasized. This led to many women feeling like they were not in control of their sexuality, and as a result, their menstruation. "The word 'taboo', which has come to mean 'forbidden' or 'sacred', comes from the Polynesian word 'tabu', which originally meant menstruation."³²

Socialist Slovenia was a patriarchal society. And the patriarchy demands discipline over one's body. But menstruation is often experienced as anything but autonomy over one's self and body. According to a global study from the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine, "Approximately 60% of women would, at least sometimes, like to postpone their bleeding and 50% wished they had the flexibility to determine when their menstrual bleeding starts."³³ This survey shows that the majority of women wish they had more control over their menstruation. The social hierarchy in patriarchal societies portrays the male body as strong and durable, but the female body as weak and fragile. Male bodies are regarded as the 'norm', while female bodies are seen as 'other', and bodily functions that are unique to females, such as menstruation, are viewed as not normal and must be hidden away. Shame is also one of the reasons why many mothers fail to give their daughters adequate information about menstruation. As a result, many women enter this stage of their lives feeling confused and out of control of their bodies. This contributes to shame and a feeling of a lack of bodily autonomy surrounding menstruation.

As soon as disposable pads became available in Socialist Yugoslavia the large majority of women stopped using homemade pads altogether. And in 1976 a new sanitary pad equipped with self-adhesive became available, and it quickly became immensely popular. The cleanliness of female bodies soon became a hot topic. Social expectations around hygiene presented disposable menstrual products as the only way to live a clean and healthy life. Menstrual pads were seen as essential to everyday life, despite being expensive in relation to average incomes. An analysis of American menstrual products from the 1920s showed that ads were aimed at the higher and upper-middle classes through the use of glamorous women, these were the social classes that already bathed regularly.³⁴ But menstrual products were viewed as necessary to all women in Socialist Yugoslavia, regardless of class. This created a sense of social equality among women.

Ads advertised greater absorbency and inconspicuousness in their products. These products were presented as being thin, flexible, and invisible. Patriarchal gender roles represent an ideal woman as being thin, flexible, invisible. She may enter the public sphere, but in order to do so, must hide many aspects of her femininity, including her menstruation. There was an increase in the number of women entering the workforce, and as an effect, a growth in the desire for products that hide menstruation. This caused sales of menstruation products to increase. This also led to large numbers of women wearing dark clothes to work, to better conceal leakage. In the first five years of the Yugoslav economic plan, 1947-1952, the female worker was used as a

symbol of power.³⁵ The success of the socialist project depended on women being present in the workplace. Women were encouraged to take time off of work if they experienced pain during menstruation, provided they had a certificate. Physicians were giving out these certificates to almost any woman who came in experiencing pain that could be linked to menstruation. This also led to the health issues of many women being ignored, their pain was just written off as menstruation complications. This increase of women in the workforce allowed Slovenian women to transition more smoothly from the private to the public sphere.

Tampons were first introduced to the Slovenian market in the 1970s. Their popularity spoke to the increasing number of women who had to manage their menstruation outside of the home and had the income to purchase more expensive products. An article titled *Five-minute Periods*³⁶ from the magazine *Naša Žena* from Yugoslavia in 1974 describes the process of menstrual extraction. These are suction pumps designed by a group of gynecologists, which remove menstrual blood from the body. The article questioned whether or not women had the 'right' to regulate their own menstruation. The uplifting of women into the public sphere quickly became connected to products that would hide their menstruation and make them 'socially acceptable.' Even though women were being given more power and the idea of them working was encouraged in many cases, their bodies were still not thought of as their own. They belonged to the patriarchy and the socialist project.

The Dakota Nation: Effect of Colonization on Menstrual Practices

Many Indigenous groups held their own practices and cultures around menstruation which were taken from them by colonizers. One of these groups is the Dakota Nation. Upon their first period, Dakota girls retired to a new tipi set up beyond the circle of camp. Female relatives cared for them and told them about the duties of a wife and mother. When her period ended, she left the tipi and the Buffalo ceremony took place. Female relatives set up a ceremonial tipi and a medicine man called upon the spirit of the buffalo to infuse the girl with womanly virtue. He then informed the community that the girl's childhood had ended.³⁷ But when many Native children were forced into residential schools, these ceremonies stopped and it led to a major loss of culture among many young women. Isaac Baird, who worked for the Presbyterian BFM Odanah mission, said that "The girls will need the training more than the boys & they will wield a greater influence in the future. If we get the girls, we get the race."³⁸ The Santee Normal Training School stated that the school's purpose was the "raising up [of] preachers, teachers,

interpreters, business men, and model mothers for the Dakota Nation."³⁹ Menstruation can be used as a tool of empowerment, or oppression. Colonial powers forcing minority and Indigenous groups to give up their traditional practices around menstruation is a form of assimilation. This is just another example of colonization. Europeans forced their practices around menstruation upon Indigenous peoples, depriving many young Indigenous girls of their culture and only contributing to the loss of lifeways among Indigenous groups.

Modern-Day Views on Menstruation

In the transition from the ancient world to the more modern world, Greek Cypriot women's experiences around menstruation reflect the two opposing poles of female nature in the Christian Orthodox tradition and Greek culture.⁴⁰ On one hand, menstruation is associated with womanhood and fertility and is viewed positively. On the other hand, menstruation is seen as 'out of place' and needs to be concealed. In Orthodox Christian culture, menstruation represents the consequences of our fallen states. Women must avoid Holy Communion during menstruation because it is to be avoided during any involuntary bodily emission.⁴¹

In Western industrialized nations, disposable pads have been commercially available in North America since 1921. Tampons with applicators became available in 1936. Most adult women in the Western industrialized world use tampons, disposable pads, and panty liners. In the industrial world, 70% of adolescents use tampons alone or in combination with pads.⁴² It is also easier for people in developed countries to have access to adequate menstrual hygiene facilities. Amenities such as access to running water for handwashing, education around menstrual hygiene, and toilets as well as other more sanitary areas to take care of menstrual blood help with menstrual hygiene.

In the developing world, it can be much more difficult to access commercial menstrual products. Cloth and other household materials such as tissue, gauze, cotton, or wool are often used as menstrual products. In some countries such as Kenya, menstruation products are heavily taxed as luxury goods, increasing the difficulty in accessing them. Menstrual products are still taxed as luxury goods in many U.S. states.⁴³ Other materials reported to be used as menstrual absorbents include banana leaves, newspaper, sponges, papyrus, tissue paper, toilet paper rolls, sand, and ashes. In the Kalangala district in central Uganda, menstruators lacking other options reported sitting immobile, on a pile of sand for the duration of menstruation to manage their bleeding.⁴⁴ Many traditional beliefs discourage the use of tampons. Many people believe that

unimpeded blood flow is necessary to maintain health, or that tampons can take one's virginity. One-third of women in urban areas of India use sanitary pads, while only 5.1% of women in rural areas of India report using them.⁴⁵ Living in an urban, more developed area, can majorly increase one's access to menstrual hygiene and menstrual hygiene facilities.

Access to menstruation products as well as cultural differences all play a role in how a menstruator will experience their period. "Significant predictors of use of sanitary pads were availability of mass media at home, economic status and urban residence."⁴⁶ When women have more access to practical, sanitary menstruation products it allows them to join the workforce and enter academic spheres in larger numbers. And when women are more educated and participate in the economy more, the entire society benefits. "Girls who receive an education are less likely to marry young and more likely to lead healthy, productive lives...Girls' education strengthens economies and reduces inequality."⁴⁷ "Countries with higher levels of women's education experience more rapid economic growth, longer life expectancy, lower population growth, and improved quality of life."⁴⁸ "Educated women contribute to the quality, size, and productivity of the workforce. They can get better paying jobs, allowing them to provide daily necessities, health care, and education to support the family."⁴⁹ Giving women access to menstruation products not only improves their quality of life but the quality of life of those around them and their entire communities.

Conclusion

How menstruation is perceived and handled across cultures and time is a valid example of world history because menstruation is present in every culture and across every time period. This is significant because access to menstruation products and hygiene as well as society's general views towards menstruation are linked to women's access to healthcare, employment, and educational opportunities. Increased access to menstruation products and an improved societal view around menstruation allow women to enter the public sphere in larger numbers. As a result of this, more women gain an education, employment, and contribute more to the economy. This allows them to not only support themselves, but their families and communities. Women with higher levels of education are also more likely to live longer and have an improved quality of life. Lifting women up through increased access to menstrual hygiene and an improved societal view on menstruation has a domino effect and improves the lives of everyone in society.

The role and treatment of menstruation in society, and as an effect women as a whole, is a huge deciding factor in how society's economy, politics, and social atmosphere will function.

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