

## **A STUDY OF FOUCAULT'S DISCIPLINARY POWER THROUGH MENSTRUAL CODES**

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### **Abstract:**

Menstrual codes are used as a tool to exercise power over women's bodies and to control women's bodies by the patriarchal society. By applying Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, we can analyse how menstrual codes are used as a very important tool to maintain patriarchy and subjugate women. By applying these menstrual codes, women's mobility, actions, thought processes, appearances are controlled. Menstrual codes are reinforced again and again by the corporations to sell more menstruation products. These codes are further enhanced by the commercial advertisements by focusing on how to hide menstrual blood, restrict menstrual smell and most importantly, how to look "normal" indicating menstruating girls and women as abnormal; and ignoring menstrual health and hygiene. Exercising of menstrual codes leads to menstrual injustice for menstruating women.

**Keywords-** women, menstruation, menstrual codes, disciplinary power, menstrual health

### **Menstruation, Menstrual Codes and Menstrual Health: An Introduction**

Menstruation is a normal biological process of a woman. It's a mark of attaining womanhood for a woman. Approximately, a woman spends menstruating seven years in her lifetime, according to a report by UNICEF. Family, peer groups, society act as agents on conveying the believes and stigmas related to menstruation from generation to generation. Most often, a girl is taught about the believes associated with periods rather than menstrual health and hygiene. Focus is given on what she should/ shouldn't do. Menstrual codes include everything about how a society conceptualizes a menstruating woman- the way women's mobility, actions, thought processes, appearances are controlled.<sup>1</sup>

Terminology Action Group defines menstrual health as follows-

Menstrual health refers to a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of diseases or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle. Achieving menstrual health implies that women, girls and all other people who experience a menstrual cycle, throughout their lifeline are able to access-

- accurate, timely, age-suitable information about periods
- opportunity to care for their bodies, their preferences, health and hygiene, comfort, privacy and safety
- timely advise from health professionals about menstrual discomforts and disorders
- a positive, respectful and healthy environment free from stigma and psychological stress and control of their bodies by others.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse Foucault's concept of disciplinary power in the context of menstrual codes to understand how these codes are used by the patriarchal society to control women's bodies and make them subjugate to men in the society.

### **Foucault's Disciplinary Power: A Theoretical Understanding**

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault discussed in detail about two forms of power. Sovereign power refers that form which is exercised through coercion and displayed explicitly in public, mostly. But the other form, that is disciplinary power, is hidden and discreet in its practice. The process of exercising of the disciplinary power is normalized in a way that people don't consider it as

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<sup>1</sup> Reynolds, Carole. (2013). Breaking Codes. ResearchGate.

exercises of power; rather they accept it as a part and parcel of their daily lives. It is practiced through its invisibility, constantly reinventing itself to appear as normal. It is indiscrete and is “everywhere and always alert”.<sup>2</sup> He highlighted the main role played by disciplinary mechanisms in the administration of societies. The essence of this form is institutionalization of power, involving the acquisition of obedience through techniques of discipline, rather than brutal coercion.

### **Menstrual Codes in the context of Foucault’s Disciplinary Power:**

By applying Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power, we can analyse how menstrual codes are used as a very important tool to maintain patriarchy and subjugate women. By applying these menstrual codes, women’s mobility, actions, thought processes, appearances are controlled. Through the use of inferior language, a negative attitude towards menstruation is reinforced which insults the worth of womanhood. In the twenty first century also, “menstrual codes” are very much in existence. It tries to maintain a balance between women bodies and patriarchal society by considering menstruation as an exclusive women matter.

Menstrual codes include everything about how menstruating women are conceptualized by the society, how menstruating women are expected to control their bodies. Menstruation is considered as a matter of shame, a thing to be hidden. A menstruating woman is very much concerned about how to appear in public. For example, she will prefer to wear loose fitting clothes so that using of sanitary napkins can’t be visible from outside, wearing dark colors so that if period’s blood leaked, it can’t be recognized by others and last but not the least, she is very much conscious about smell so that other people don’t know about her menstruation. Although menstruation is a biological process, society associates some other meanings to it which don’t have any relation to the biological condition. Menstrual blood is considered as impure. Women’s bodies are considered as polluted during menstruation days and because of this stigmatization of menstruation, menstruating women are kept away from holy ceremonies in many places. They are denied to enter into kitchen, temples, participating in pujas, going to school, touching others. From ancient times, menstruation is kept under dark and evil.

### **Role of Menstrual Products in Reinforcing Menstrual Codes:**

Menstrual codes are reinforced again and again by the corporations to sell more menstruation products. These codes are further enhanced by the commercial advertisements. If we look properly, we can see that these advertisements focused more on how to prevent menstruation from knowing by other people rather than giving importance on health issues. They present how a woman can stay for a long time in periods without leakage of menstruation blood, without bad smell and without being visible from outside and we, women, also mainly focused on these issues only rather than our health. We prefer those products which can give us a normal look by absorbing menstrual blood, controlling smell rather than going for the healthy products. For example, Kotex Control advertisements re-enforce the long-established codes that menstruating women should control their bodies. It is the responsibility of the menstruating women to control their menstruation smell. Name of some popular brands of menstrual products also carries the stigmas associated with menstruation such as *WHIPSER*, literal meaning according to the Oxford dictionary is ‘a low, quiet voice’.

These commercial advertisements are shaped in the same way the society is exercising its menstrual codes so that they can attract customers. The reason behind these advertisements looks so normal because we have normalised these codes since our childhood. A girl often comes to know about menstrual products from others when she reaches puberty without having information about the relevance of these products to menstrual products. They are familiar to only some popular brands and unaware about other available options such as menstrual cup which is more beneficial for health and also for the environment. Corporations also use this opportunity and promote only those

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<sup>2</sup> Foucault, M (1977): *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books.

products which are familiar to common people by revealing how long it'll last and how it'll help to look normal, cleverly hiding the information about menstrual health because people choose a menstrual product on the basis of prevailing beliefs ignoring the health and hygiene. This problem will be minimised when people will focus on usefulness of the products rather than on menstrual codes. Till then the corporations will try to show only what people want like longevity, hiding capacity etc. of the products. When people will be more attentive to health information, then only they will work on developing health and hygiene perspectives of these products.

### **Conclusion:**

Patriarchal society uses menstrual codes as a tool to exercise politics over women's bodies by controlling them in the long run which results in "Menstrual Injustice", a term used by Professor Johnson in her article Menstrual Justice which means injustice to menstruating women done through disadvantages, discrimination, exclusion etc.<sup>3</sup> Women are discriminated in their workplace, education, society because of prevalence of menstrual codes. In the workplace, women don't enjoy necessary health and hygiene facilities which acts as a barrier in their performance leading to them stay either in lower position or extreme compromises regarding their health. Same applies to education. If a girl misses classes for  $\frac{3}{4}$  days every month because of lack of health and hygiene facilities, equality of education can't be justified.

Due to the absence realization of the exercise of power through these menstrual codes, people normalized it as a part and parcel of their lives, specially by the women. As we have discussed above, commercial advertisements also help in reinforcement of these codes by focusing more on social construction of menstruation rather than menstrual health. Menstruation is presented as something which should be kept in secret and should be talked in private.

Article 21 also claims that Right to Life talks about living with dignity rather than mere animal existence. The Supreme Court in Kharak Singh case held that the term 'Life' in Article 21 means not only the continuance of one's animal existence; it also includes the faculties of thinking and feeling. In Francis Corlie case, the Supreme Court said that Life under Article 21 means the Right to Live with Dignity and all that goes with it- the basic necessities of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing, shelter and facilities for reading, writing and expressing oneself.<sup>4</sup> So, the core idea of Rights to Life, in accordance with these verdicts, is questionable here.

By summarising the definitions regarding life and menstrual health together, we can say that living with dignity during their menstruation days in an environment which is free from stigmas, stress, control and where the menstruating woman herself can choose where she should or shouldn't go, is a fundamental right of a woman. Hence, the imposition of stigmas on menstruating woman, through which woman's body, thought process, movement are controlled, is a violation of their fundamental rights and therefore, it shouldn't be normalised.

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