

## WRITING THE BODY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

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Menstruation has deep sociological meanings among the Hindus of Assam, India. Normative rituals and restrictions are associated to this physiological condition of the body from the onset of menarche till one reaches menopause. Being an Assamese Hindu, I have been a participant to these menstrual customs and have lived them. Their deeper connotations and how their practice subtly creates and maintains disparity between men and women has always been a matter of curiosity for me. My anthropological training offered me the opportunity to delve into the lives of Assamese women to decipher the same. In this paper I utilize and combine the lived experiences of my own and my native respondents with the use of autoethnographic means. In doing so, I have tried to bring forth that studying one's own society is not to be viewed as "emotional" and can through an inquiry of the ethnographic self lead to the creation of "scientific learning". This paper is an attempt to propagate the utilisation of the autoethnographic method as a valid research methodology in anthropology. I would thus try through this method to make an investigation of the menstruating body and how its embodiment builds gender discrimination in varied forms by the contained behaviours women exhibit in their everyday lives.

I attempted my first autobiographical case in the year 1999 for a Masters Project on methods used to heal menstrual cramps. This was part of five more case studies through which I tried to address pluralism in healing. My interest and my practice in menstruation and the social connotations it exhibits led me to a larger domain of it as part of my M. Phil and PhD research. This interest developed in me, by virtue of the fact that when I reached menarche I had to surrender to an initiation ritual which was followed by the practice of monthly taboos during menstruation. These processes which were confusing, disturbing, difficult and full of anxiety, for me as a young girl, made me wonder why such procedures were present in my native place Assam, for women alone.

As a student of anthropology, studying humans and human culture and society from several aspects, I realized that this social feature needed a thorough academic investigation. This could bring forth an ethnographic understanding of such beliefs and practices. This could also pave another way of portraying how women in society are delegated an inferior position however subtly, in this case through the practice of rituals and restrictions exclusively created for women. Hence in this text on autoethnography, I will discuss my lived experiences and memories and accentuate them with experiences of other women. I would thus make an effort to re-present my work from the perspective of autoethnography and reconstruct a worthwhile academic piece.

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### **Presenting the Menstrual Experience**

My home town Guwahati (in Assam, India) exhibits both modern and traditional characters in varying degrees, which is comfortably managed by its occupants. Menstruation is a physiological phenomenon which is associated with the religious, cultural and social realm of the Assamese people, the inhabitants of Assam. The main perpetrators are the menstruating women of all ages who create connectivity between the physical, psychological, cultural and social arena. Their identity and how they identify their bodies in terms of embodiment can be seen as a vital part of feminist research. What better way than to posit myself as one of the performers in menstruation along with other women from my own community and open up a discourse of lived experiences and the psychological and cultural meaning inscribed to them.

Before we embark upon a discussion on an autoethnographic inquiry from the context of the body being employed as a device of subordination through the subtle practice of rituals and taboos, let me introduce the audience to how and why I decided to proceed on an emic pedagogical inquiry into it.

I reached menarche one week before the age of 12. Following the norms of Assamese society my mother upon learning about it, shifted me to a room specifically arranged with a bed on the floor. It included ritualistic items such as a lit metal lamp, some mango leaves, some *dubori* grass, rice etc. I was made to stay there in isolation for a week. Only the women in the family (my mother, sister and aunts) visited me to offer empathic support during this period of immense perplexity which I went through. It was confusing why my new physical status required such attention, the kind which only filled my young mind with disgust for myself. I was coerced to participate in rituals and taboos arising out of my new social status of a pollutant, which outdid the real status of the physical transformation. On the fourth and the seventh days, certain rites were conducted announcing my new sexual identity, that I was now capable of reproducing. This was followed by monthly restrictions during my menstruation. It only stopped when I left home to pursue higher studies in Delhi. The whole act of dictating the body to preserve social norms however is a matter of concern and needs to be looked into. When I was growing up, I comprehended as much that what I was going through, was what all girls and women in Assam had to succumb to. For my M. Phil and my PhD, I returned to my native place and researched women on menstruation and its socio-cultural and socio-political implications. This was to facilitate a discussion on menstruation at a pedagogical plane.

### **On Autoethnography as a Means to Inquiry**

Autoethnography is a qualitative method used in social sciences. It is sometimes debated that the method being based on memories, indicates a narrative of the self, a first person narrative (Ellis, 2004), which reads more like novels or

autobiographies. It definitely questions the conventional way of conducting research from the objective perspective. Ellis (2004) and Denzin (1997) have focused on the interpretive and interactionist structure of ethnographic material. This is based on investigations carried out on the self and on one's own community. Scholars like Heider (1975) used autoethnography as a method and connected the "self" to the respondent unlike others (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Reed-Danahay, 1997) who view it to be associated with the ethnographer. Hayano (1979) used the word autoethnography in an essay and viewed it to be the "cultural studies of an ethnographer's 'own people'." (Pace, 2012: 4).

With the use of various postmodern methods of investigating society, the introduction of autoethnography as a method for inquiry creates new tensions in the conventional system of doing ethnography. Of the many ways autoethnographic research can be done, I choose to focus on a combination of evocative autoethnography and analytic autoethnography clubbed together and autoethnography based on grounded theory. Pace (2012) looks at evocative autoethnography as research writing which is in first person style, where the main protagonist is the researcher and whose narrative is subjective, evocative, and divulges emotional experiences. The main experiences of the researcher are inquired along with comparable events of other participants in a reflexive way (Ellis, 2004). The final outcome is "ethnographic in its methodological orientation, cultural in its interpretive orientation and autobiographical in its content orientation" (Chang, 2008: 48). Though for many it might be no more than a chronicle, a novel or a story, but it differs from these as it "transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation."

Anderson (2006) views analytical autoethnography as belonging to a sub-category of realist ethnographic practice. The researcher in this case is a member of the community s/he investigates. S/he conducts analytical reflexivity and though the researcher's self is portrayed in her/his narrative, the dialogue carried out with the respondents is equally or more significant than her/his self. Such a researcher is also faithful to theoretical examination, hence doing more than the evocative auto-ethnographer. Anderson thus points out that the "definitive feature of analytic autoethnography is this value-added quality of not only truthfully rendering the social world under investigation but also transcending that world through broader generalisation" (2006: 388).

Then there is Vryan (2006) who suggests that evocative and analytic autoethnography may not always be viewed separately and can be combined. He says that severance of 'traditional research writing styles' (analytical autoethnography) and 'creative, emotional, first person writing styles' (evocative autoethnography) is not necessary. This is what I propose to do in my following study.

Lastly I view my autoethnographic study from another methodology, that of grounded theory. The term grounded theory was coined by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in their famous work *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967). Here, instead of proceeding to the field with a hypothesis and testing it, a researcher builds it in the field while collecting data from the respondents.

Pace (2012) points out that these methods may be used together in autoethnographic studies as “flexible strategies rather than as a set of prescriptive procedures and rules” (2012: 13).

With these strategies of doing autoethnography I move forward with my discussion on the socio-cultural inferences of menstruation as an expression of embodiment through lived experiences of women including myself.

### **The Body in Menstruation: Rituals and Restrictions**

Menstruation is an occurrence which visits almost all women in their lifetime. However how this mere physical condition of the female human is relegated to a polluted condition with social and cultural insinuations is a matter to be comprehended. In this we also need to understand, how the body is viewed and realised by women and how due to it, a whole life induced with socio-cultural connotations is built. This embodiment which creates stark sexual differences is what we need to make sense of. Here I avoid the stance of studying embodiment from the phenomenology which is simply based on corporeal but one which is based on the social and relational. One which depicts “the existential richness of being in-the-world” through the “vividness and urgency of experience” (Csordas, 2002: 3).

Rites of passage are any rite which announces the transformation of an individual’s social status. In Assam there are rituals performed to declare the entry of a girl into womanhood. This performance at menarche called *Shanti Biya* or *Tuloni Biya* is vital to the functioning of the Assamese society. The word *Shanti* denotes the parents’ relief when the daughter menstruates, indicating the girl’s capability of getting married and producing children. The other term *Tuloni* is *Tula* or *Tuli Luwa* meaning a girl has been elevated to a higher social position in society. *Biya* means marriage.

These rituals which have cultural significance are also symbolic and pave the way for a girl to behave according to norms and customs that are prevalent. At the onset of menarche, a girl is kept in confinement in a room for seven days. During this period, among many things, she is made to survive only on milk products, sprouts and fruits. Taboos include not viewing men, not combing her hair, not cutting nails or reading books. During her days of seclusion she is to show reverence to the almighty and maintain a docile bearing. Depending on the time of reaching menarche the family priest proclaims the amount of fasting to be done by the girl. The fasting can last anywhere from a week to a month or more depending on the

“*yug*” meaning fate, the girl possesses. Another significant aspect is the 7<sup>th</sup> day purifying bath where the girl is playfully married off to a banana plantain, which signifies a mock husband. In the evening the whole ritualistic process comes to an end with a feast where she is decorated like a bride and people are invited to bless her. Both these last deeds signify the girl’s newly attained status of a sexual being ready for marriage and reproduction.

As a native of Assamese society I had to go through similar processes at menarche. In a room barred from all men, I was kept in seclusion for seven days. In defiance I did read all my old Tintin comic books. I went through the process of being bathed and wedded to the banana tree representing my future “husband”. Our family priest proclaimed that since I had menstruated in the afternoon so I had to go through a month of fasting - eating boiled rice and boiled pulses. I had to forgo savouries and sugary treats due to this imposed restriction. On the seventh day a feast was arranged for me, where I was decorated like a bride in all finery and guests comprising of close relatives and friends came to offer their blessings.

Being just 12 years of age, my young mind was dumbfounded by the rituals performed on me as an act to commemorate my entry into social adulthood. I was not only distraught by the many rituals conducted, but also by the level of difficulty and restraints associated with them. Menarche made me look at my body from a different perspective. Before attaining it, I was unaware of what it was (my mother did not give me timely advice) and the bodily changes that were connected to it. I realised with my separation from the everyday world for the seven days, that my body was now a harbinger of a new social identity. This awareness of the self, became the other in the gazes that I deciphered in my patriarchal Assamese society. From then on through constant reminders and subtle hints, as part of my socialisation, I was told to enact the body in a pleasing way for the society I was part of.

The rituals, the associated restrictions and the new representation of the body, made me ponder on how rules and norms have been designed for women, forcing them to behave in particular accepted ways whereas at the same time, the same society did not have any rules for boys or men to make their existence in society acceptable.

Before embarking upon a discourse on the theoretical analysis of autoethnographic methods and embodiment of women through menstruation, I would first present a brief about the menstrual restriction that follow the rituals at menarche which continue till a woman reaches her menopause. Here the reasons and consequences for following such monthly taboos as polluted bodies will be looked into and how in such acts, the body comes into play.

Following the rituals at menarche, an Assamese girl is entrusted with taboos and restrictions which are to be practiced throughout their menstrual life. These taboos are viewed from two perspectives, one where the body is seen to be impure

and the other, where the body is in need of protection and hence to be managed accordingly. It is the former however which is more dominant in epitomizing itself as a polluting agent. In fact in Assamese language, among varied words for menstruation, one is *Suwa*, which means polluted or impure. This is viewed to be blood containing dirt emitting from the body of women and contact with such women, would make impure all animate and inanimate beings. It is this “pollutant” which controlled in the name of “protection” through taboos takes away the right of living a normal life from menstruating women.

Among other descriptions, it is also said that assigning it a pollution is because the blood being dirty emits *durgondho* (foul smell) and *bijanu* (germs). It is to contain the possibility of smearing such blood hither and thither that restricting women’s mobility became a necessity. The hygienic aspect was given importance to, due to the fear of spread of any kind of disease through the menstruating blood. Hence rules were designed to limit such situations by enforcing women to practice them.

In terms of protection, women are provided rest from all daily chores. With many women suffering from menstrual cramps and the body, mostly the clitoris, uterus and vagina, being assumed to be weak due to the continuous blood flow, many women welcome this rest as a benefit. However it is not to be forgotten that it is not just rest which is given to women but they are deemed as polluted for menstruating and that these restrictions are also connected to the social and religious life.

The taboos are called *niyam palan kora* meaning following of rules. There are many taboos followed by menstruating girls/women. To cite a few: seclusion in one’s own room for three days, not touching anything on the way while going to urinate or excrete, to carry a separate stool or chair if wanting to be in another room, not sending girls to school (in stricter households), not cooking or going to the kitchen, food being placed in utensils and given (such utensils are washed and maintained by the menstruator), not to wear vermilion on forehead if married (as vermilion symbolises purity), not to touch plants, not to visit the prayer place at home or outside, not to partake in any religious activity etc. Interestingly married women are not allowed to sleep with their husbands due to the fear of the husband getting some incurable ailment and endangering their lives by coming in contact with the menstrual blood. Some taboos lasts for three days while others end by the seventh, like entering the kitchen and the prayer house. A purifying bath, which includes a head bath, cleanses a woman’s body from all defilement at the end of menses every month.

The rules become stricter once every year (in June) when it is believed that Goddess *Kamakhya* (a Hindu deity), residing in Guwahati, Assam menstruates. This is the time when monsoon arrives and the whole earth is viewed to be polluted. This period is called *Ambubasi* and women, who menstruate at the same time as the Goddess, are made to go through similar rituals of separation conducted at

menarche, the main being seclusion in one room and consuming only fruits and boiled food.

During this time the Kamakhya temple remains closed and once it reopens, *prasad* (sacred hand outs) is distributed. They are *angadhak* (fluid that is believed to be emitted from the Goddess's body) and *angabostro* (red cloth covering the Goddess's *yonis* [vagina]). These hand outs are collected by devotees as it is believed that they have the capacity (specially the cloth) to cure women suffering from menstrual disorders.

Having provided a brief about the process of restrictions and taboos, I have tried to exhibit how menstruation effectively assists in the running of the structure of Assamese society. That this physiological condition, which women entails and influences their unequal position is important to note. It all comes down to the body being used for the survival of societal norms and customs, wherein subtly the inferior status of women is created.

The fact that I have been today capable of bringing the embodied menstrual behavior to light in the form of an academic piece is because I was a performer in both the conducting of rituals and restrictions. This experiencing of the self associated with the experience of the others, has helped me develop religious, social and cultural practices, imbibed in reflexivity.

After attaining menarche and while performing the rituals at that time, I was also educated by my mother and aunts about the monthly taboos to be followed henceforth. Thankfully I was allowed to go to school while menstruating but once at home, I was made to be in my own room. I was made to have my meals in my own room but at times I was allowed to eat in the dining area, but in a separate chair. My aunts were stricter as they strongly believed the process of menstruation to be connected to religion and purity. On the third day, I had my purifying bath after which I was allowed to assume my daily chores except for visiting the kitchen and the prayer place. Throughout my menstruating life at home, I along with my elder sister always used to question and have disagreements about the prescribed taboos but our pleas fell on deaf ears. If practicing the monthly taboos were not enough, I had to follow serious taboos when I menstruated during *Ambubasi*. These created nothing but feelings of disgust about why I had to conduct my body in a particular way for society to accept me as normal. My mother had once revealed to me that if we were in a nuclear family than she would not have made us follow such stringent rules, but being in a joint patriarchal household she did not have the courage to protest. I stopped practicing the taboos once I went to Delhi to pursue higher studies at the age of 22. Now, when I visit home and if I have my menses, I resort to means by which I do not let my family know that I am menstruating. Unlike me, most girls and women in Assam of all classes and castes, follow the rituals and restrictions as part of their daily regimen, believing in them and managing their bodies accordingly.

Menarche is a process which socialises a girl in ways to conduct the body due to which behaviours are created and become ones which are appreciated by society. Dube opines that “Gender roles are conceived, enacted, and learnt within a complex of relationships” (2001: 88). Through enculturation, a young girl is ingrained with ideas of how she is to proceed through different stages of life, the admission to menstrual rituals, being one of them, where her feminine identity is built. This is extended through monthly menstrual restriction and women view and enact their bodies with mannerisms that assist in the running of the society. She is made to believe that she is a pollutant, thus lowering her position to men in society. Dube asserts that “the construction of femininity is a continuous, complex and occasionally a contradictory process” (2001: 96). The behaviour which is explained to and expected from a newly menstruating girl helps in “developing their consciousness of femininity” (2001: 97). These acts of docility, maintenance of bodily hygiene, dressing up and beautifying oneself in accepted ways, these embodiments remove the identity of the self to an identity of the other. This concept was propounded by Beauvoir in her famous work, *The Second Sex* (1953).

My lived experiences, combined with the reactions of my respondents work towards the combination of what I had posited earlier, i.e. forwarding a discussion based on evocative and analytical autoethnography. In connection to it, I now place cases to validate how use of such means can reveal ways of life of a society or a community.

My research on menstruating women as I had mentioned before are based on my M. Phil and my PhD work where the investigations were conducted in an urban (Uzan Bazar, it being my own locality) and a rural (Simlitola) area respectively among Hindu women belonging to two caste groups, the Brahmins and the Koibartas (a Scheduled Caste group). These are the two main caste groups prevalent in these areas with only Koibartas in *Simlitola*.

The rituals and restrictions were reconstructed by data collected from other respondents. An elderly woman who attained menarche way back in 1951 recalled that all rituals were conducted on her carefully, including placing her for those seven days in a bed made of straw on the floor. In fact she was not given any food for the first two days. It was only on the third day that she was given fruits. Moreover no cloth was provided during menarche to contain the flow but it was made to flow out and release all dirt in it. This is why complete seclusion was necessary. Other processes like bathing on the fourth and seventh day with the ritual of marrying to a banana plantain was done meticulously. However there was no elaborate feast held and only a few elderly women came to offer blessings. Men were not allowed to be present in any of it. On the seventh day once the rituals were over, she was told that from then on she was no longer a child and had to maintain mannerisms which advocated the bases of conventional femininity.

But in recent times, many changes are seen in the practice of menarche rituals. In a different case where the girl attained menarche in 2002, she informed that she had some idea about what menstruation is since her mother informed her prior. She had also seen friends who reached menarche before her and had talked about it. So when she finally attained menarche she was not surprised but was in fact relieved. This was because many of her friends had already reached menarche and she was one of the late ones. She was not shifted to a separate room but was kept in her own room on her own bed. She was given fruits and boiled food from the first day itself and she was given her purifying bath in the family bathroom. The mother did not make a hue and cry about her condition and in fact did not even arrange for a feast. She was told that she will have to follow some restrictions monthly while menstruating which she does not find them to be very suppressive.

Changes in performance of rituals and taboos are observed in many households especially in the urban area due to education, employment, migration, change in family set up etc. However the sociological processes of menstruation have not come to an end completely and are managed according to the convenience of the doers. Its presence, a woman's body and her position in society still remains in an inferior position. Though the latter case showed that there was no feast to celebrate her new identity, in many other cases it has been found that the feast has become a more pronounced activity. Loud music, dancing, presence of men, large amount of food, gifting etc. are also seen practiced by many households. This in fact has for many become a way to announce one's social status in society.

Women enact their monthly taboos in different ways. Women in joint families still have to perform their taboos more in the name of rest, as there are always other women to contribute to domestic chores. Others have stopped practicing the severe ones after the death of their mothers-in-law. Younger women living in nuclear households visit their kitchens throughout their menses as they are the ones who cook. These changes may sound progressive as women now perform taboos according to their convenience. However the fact that they are still practiced, and that women are still socialised to understand and present their bodies in ways to satisfy societal norms, suggest more than the eye can see.

The young unmarried girls, recently enculturated with ideas of submissiveness, gentleness and ladylikeness, with ideas about a better future in compliance of customs, are fearful and reluctant to completely discard them. However they are aware that these practices also place them in a different space where they are unequal and lower than men. Also new avenues in academics, career choices etc do make them revisit and comprehend the actual necessity of such norms. But the powers of socialisation is such combined with fear of defying religious entities and social dictates, that they want to maintain them as much as they can. Following of practices or not, the day a girl reaches menarche her behaviour and understanding of her body changes. It is most important to create and carry their femaleness in

them, and it is this which does not allow them to rise and hence keep them subordinated.

### **Anthropological Interpretation through Autoethnography**

This paper has till now, provided a narrative of the social processes of menstruation in Assam. This has been done by using myself as one of the main protagonist in menstrual experiences. As the paper attempts to put forward how autoethnography can be used as a concrete methodology in anthropology, I tried to utilise my own lived experiences corroborated with other Assamese women's involvement in menstruation to bring forth the said analysis. In the socio-cultural reading of menstruation, there are many anthropological interpretations which can be endeavoured upon. I however through autoethnography would like to present this paper from the perspective of gender embodiment.

Elsewhere (under publication), in another paper on menstruation and autoethnography, I have categorically tried to understand menstruation rituals as part of rites of passage as advocated by van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1969, 1974) interpretive supposition of Geertz (1973) and Turner (1969) and combined it with a study on reflexivity as postulated by Foucault (1966) and Clifford and Marcus (1986). A feminist interpretation through embodiment as a discourse was also attempted along with the above, but did not hold the centre stage in it.

In this paper, I try to concentrate solely on embodiment and gender inequality. The body of women plays the main performer in menstruation, the initiation rituals and the monthly taboos, which creates gender inequality in an understated manner, and the attempt to contain these bodies is mirrored in gender politics. In systems based on symbols, Douglas (1967) asserts that the body is the most basic.

In my attempt to understand embodiment through the use of autoethnography, I realised that I had to dabble with the issues of insider/outsider arguments within autoethnography. Autoethnographies are definitely distinctive as a methodology in social sciences (Reed-Danahay, 1997 and Clough, 2000). Autoethnographers use emotions, delve on self-reflexivity and textual means to provide a social-cultural description of society, and then depicting the relation between the self and the social, through logical analysis (Ruiz-Junco and Vidal-Ortiz, 2011).

I have as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, tried to use evocative and analytical auto-ethnographic methods together as one along with the use of grounded theory. With the first emphasis being on the self, it then proceeds to concentrate on society. The conversations and interviews conducted while investigating has been a two way process. The thoughts shared were valued and comprehended by giving them my own experiences, thus making it into a cooperative effort. This finally allows me to assess my findings with a feminist analysis.

The authenticity of autoethnography as a methodology in social sciences is visited by trying to see if it can provide a legitimate description of a society and its community. This is so as compared to orthodox anthropological ethnographic methods, this is interpreted by many as grounded in memories and self experiences. However following a post-modernistic stance the deconstruction of old methods can always give way to the construction of novel ones. These new ones including autoethnography emphasises on the use of subjectivity over objectivity and gives reflexive presentation of society a new meaning. Reflexivity created a domain for itself in the 1970s with the works of Clifford and Marcus (1986), Geertz (1973), Rabinow (1978) etc.

Hence in this autoethnographic attempt, putting subjectivity at the forefront we try to at the same time present an impartial analytical point of view. With the self as the main actor, as Ellis (2004) and Denzin (1997) propagates, I added and substantiated my accounts (of menstrual rituals and restrictions) with that of other people, my respondents, to give the ethnographic interpretation social significance. This also helps in validating the reflexive genre being talked about here, which supports the subjective assessment merged with the interpretive mode. The grounded theory was included with me looking for my findings from a non-hypothetical position and using relevant anthropological approach from the facts assembled.

A feminist interpretation based on embodiment, will try to understand what portrayals does the ways that menstruating women in Assamese society illustrate through their actions signify. To start, one needs to comprehend that the biological condition of menstruation gain sociological meaning as girls/women are socialised to accept and carry out menstrual rituals and taboos throughout their menstruating lives. From the very beginning they are threatened through fears of ill health and unsuccessful married life.

The menstruating body is used to practice proscriptions along with its management. Women do so to survive as norm performers of society. However as this is done as part of a patriarchal system, the body is looked down upon as impure and contaminated and is thus reduced to a degraded status. Girls are provided with specific training in the management of femaleness at the onset of puberty. This instructs girls to be docile which give way to bodily subordination (West and Zimmerman 1987; Kissling 2006). Kissling (2006) says that main agenda of correct feminine socialisation is to make a woman internalize the prevailing socio-cultural and traditionally significant dialogues in order to nurture an image where the self is perceived as an object.

Women in Assam who were interviewed are not exactly aware of the severity of the idea of pollution. As they were taught in the safeguarding of their femininity at an early age, the lessons learnt are deeply ingrained in them. The internalization of these learnings are such that they believe that behaving according to society's patriarchal dictates of following menstrual norms are for their best. Women succumb

to this feminine embodiment by considering their bodies as objects required to be controlled. Embodiment, as Moore puts it, becomes the essence of their identity (1994). This embodiment “naturalizes differences between men and women in order to substantiate a moral judgment about “women’s place” (Howson, 2004: 49). Thus embodiment does not remain about “being-in-the-body or behaviour but experience, subjectivity, political consciousness...” etc (Thapan, 2009: 6).

The outcome of the practice of rituals and restrictions is the inferior social status of women in Assamese society, which assigns her the status of the “other”. The viewing of self as an object is what supports de Beauvoir’s (1953 [1949]) existentialist work on women as “other”. Women with the definition of “other” thus can only be acted upon and their experiences and existence are created through the commands of society. This is where de Beauvoir’s famous quote, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1953: 301). It not only points out to the socially built idea of gender but also signifies that a whole lot goes on in the making of the perfect feminine woman. This is where the performing of rituals and restrictions come in as symbolic to retaining femininity involving firm routines which the men are conveniently free from.

This performance of gender was taken forward by Butler (1990), who reinstated that this performance creates gender and thus is not biologically constructed. These performances ascertain social sanctions and taboos. Thus in the embodiment of gender, these performances, experienced as gender actions, are implementation of patriarchal morals of femininity which are self-regulating.

This also follows the ideas of stigmas (Goffman, 1963) and the male gaze (Foucault, 1977 [1975]). To take Goffman’s view first, the fact that menstrual blood is viewed as repulsive body fluid presumably containing germs, it slurs the body of a woman and brands her as stigmatized. What Goffman, characterized as abomination of the body to associate it as one form of stigma, is where women’s menstruation, take for granted as dirt and foul smelling falls into. It is to conceal these assumed thoughts of society that women resort to preventive measures in the form of monthly taboos. This is also associated with Goffman’s concept of individual blemishes where women are fearful of leakage or stain of menstrual blood in public, which would put a question on their feminine character. Same is with menstrual illnesses, like stomach cramps. Thus the restrictions containing them at home, act as their only resort.

Foucault’s (1977 [1975]) discourse of power and the concept of the meek body and the effect of the male gaze is also to be importantly considered in this discussion. We view this from two perspectives. One where girls reach menarche, they are socialised to interpret the gaze of the male to affirm to a hetero-normative behaviour (Lee, 1994; Stubbs and Costos, 2004). They start carrying their bodies in such accepted ways which would have the approval of the male gaze. Following Foucault, this may be viewed as a kind of self-objectification immersed in menstrual

protocols. Secondly at the same time when their menstrual happening is revealed in terms of either a viewing simple sanitary napkin advertisement on television in front of men or menstrual stain being seen by men, women smirk at the thought of their condition being revealed. They dread the male gaze which comes their way in such situations as they feel torn open and humiliated to be exposed off their virtuousness. Such is the socialisation that women go through on menstruation that it takes away the right of living a normal, not being judged life from women. It is a constant reminder of the inferior status they occupy in society. Howson (2004: 57) asserts that “the female body is the object of the male gaze in more mundane aspects of everyday life, and feminist research demonstrates how the experience of being watched encourages women to be conscious of themselves and invest in their bodies as the expression of self”. From the beginning at menarche when girls are told not to look at men as part of rituals in Assam, signifies that men and women are separate from then on. The simple physiological change in the body leads to unbelievable yet accepted easily rules for girls and women in the form of rituals and taboos. This is carried forward through enactment of the body leading to various kinds of gender embodiment as performed and experienced by women in Assamese society. Such gendered expectations do nothing but control the female body in order to retain social dependence and social weakness of women delicately or otherwise.

To end, the discourse on gender embodiment was attempted from the perspective of autoethnography to illustrate the existing realities of Assamese society. In doing this, I hope I have been adequately productive in employing myself as an access and then utilizing the thoughts of my respondents to outline the socio-cultural connotations my native society holds. This was done through the discussion on menstruation as a cultural construct and its sociological manifestations and how due to this women’s position and status in society is unfairly compromised. It is hoped from this work that autoethnography can be considered as an effective methodology in anthropological inquiry and anthropologists who wants to provide a deliberation of their own society and culture by using themselves as the main protagonists, may be able to utilize this method effectively.

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