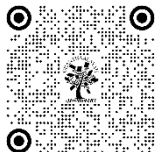


LOOK, LOOK! THIS SHRINE IS LEAKING RED “MENSTRUAL ACTIVISM IN NINA PAGALIES’ GRAPHIC TEMPLES”

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation is a physiological phenomenon that has long been associated with taboos and myths that justify women's exclusion from religious ceremonies and the public realm. Many cultures around the world consider menstruating women as unholy and polluting, often associating them with filth that must stay beyond the threshold of shrines and places of worship. Owing to the negative attributes associated with menstruation, the equation between women's bodies and divinity gets problematized leading to their polarised conception. Such beliefs culminate into sexist practices that often undermine women's rights and freedom and become instruments of perpetuating gender-based violence against them. The controversy of Sabarimala Temple in India stands as testimony to the above statement. This paper explores graphics from a collection titled 'Temples' by a German illustrator, Nina Pagalies, anthologized in *The Elephant in the Room: Women Draw their World*. Her work, *Temples*, explore varied experiences and attributes of female sexuality that are beautifully dovetailed to the idea of religion and purity by depicting women's bodies as shrines and temples, thus reconciling the otherwise polarised view of female sexuality and the divine. This paper unravels how the Pagalies' visuals subvert the notion of dirt and impurity associated with menstruation to support the narrative that rather celebrates it. It undertakes a semiotic analysis of the 'gendered blood' and other motifs to understand how these visuals are transgressive. Subsequently, the paper closes with the view that the illustrations valorize the 'female blood' and debunks patriarchal modes of representation by carving a democratic vista for feminine expression advocating the permission of menstruating females into temples.

Keywords: Menstruation, Religion, Female Body, Visual Arts, Myths, Taboos, Auspiciousness, Exclusion, Gendered Blood, Leaky Bodies, Clenched-Fist Symbol

1. INTRODUCTION

The Elephant in the Room is an assortment of visual narratives and expressions from sixteen women comic artists who got together for a ten-day workshop in Karnataka and decided to paint their daily lived experiences and views on identity, power, family, sex, their bodies, and various issues that are taboo in public discourse. This collaborative effort culminated in the launch of the anthology in 2016 at the Comic Salon Festival in Erlangen, Germany. Nina Pagalies is one of the sixteen artists who contributed with her graphic feast *Temples*, a collection of

ten temples devoted to the female body. In her bold portrayals of women's bodies and intimate parts as holy shrines, she bravely discusses the largest and loudest secrets, like menstruation, while coalescing personal and political themes. Menstruation is a physiological phenomenon that has long been associated with taboos and myths that lead to women's exclusion from religious ceremonies and the public realm. Many cultures around the world consider menstruating women as unholy and polluting, often associating them with filth that must stay beyond the threshold of shrines and places of worship. In 2018, the stir that an illustration of an Indian artist, Aniket Mitra, created stands as a testimony to how controversial the depiction of menstruation art continues to be, especially when it is linked to religion. His picture depicted a sanitary pad with blood stains in the form of a lotus, an emblem of goddess Durga. Mitra was criticized by many for offending religious sensibilities by associating divinity with uterine blood while many lauded his efforts. But the ensuing uproar resulted in the removal of the illustration from social media within twenty-four hours of its posting.

Figure 1



Figure 1 The Controversial Visual of a Sanitary Pad with a Blood-Lotus by Aniket Mitra. Image Culled from Google.

Figure 1 ALT-TEXT: The image of a white coloured sanitary pad placed at the centre of the visual against a dull-yellow background. Right at the centre of the pad,

one sees a blood-red lotus with 'Durga Chal' (circular canvas placed behind Durga's idol) placed on top of the pad.

Figure 2



Figure 2 The Elephant in the Room: Women Draw their World, Art by Nina Pagalies. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017. 39

Figure 2 ALT -TEXT: Temple Building of Pagalies' visual features a red carpet laid out, a snake protruding from the top of its structure and two coconuts sprouting water in the mid-section of the temple.

The present study endeavors to delve into the visual representations by Pagalies that connect menstruation and religion, by unraveling the diverse motifs and symbols interwoven within them, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their implications when analyzed within the framework of exclusion and auspiciousness. Furthermore, this study aims to demonstrate how such visual depictions have the power to disrupt power structures and counter the stigma surrounding menstruation. By critically examining these depictions, we identify ways in which they challenge prevailing cultural attitudes toward menstruation and present alternative narratives that advocate inclusivity, acceptance, and equitable access to places of worship.

In the opening of her visual collection, Pagalies states that her temples are based on the preface to *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler, a play that includes first-person narratives of several women about their vagina and other experiences related to it, one of which includes menstruation. This was consciously done to foster a space for women to freely articulate their perceptions and concerns that are otherwise deemed uncomfortable. In the Foreword of *The Vagina Monologues*,

Gloria Steinem talks about going to the Library of Congress to look for a little-known history of religious buildings whose designs looked like a female body. She notes:

Though this comparison was new to me, it struck home like a rock down a well. Of course, I thought. The central ceremony of patriarchal religions is one in which men take over the yoni-power of creation by giving birth symbolically. No wonder male religious leaders so often say that humans were born in sin—because we were born to female creatures. Only by obeying the rules of the patriarchy can we be reborn through men. No wonder priests and ministers in skirts sprinkling birth fluid over our heads, give us new names, and promise rebirth into everlasting life. No wonder the male priesthood tries to keep women away from the altar, just as women are kept away from the control of our own powers of reproduction. Symbolic or real, it’s all devoted to controlling the power that resides in the female body. [Enslar \(2001\)](#), para. 12)

The above-stated ‘powers of creation’ finds expression in Pagalies’ illustrations of menstruating temples the understanding of which can be situated within the conflicting frameworks of celebration and exclusion of women from religious spaces by oxymoronic construction of the female body as unholy/unclean and divine. Given that the workshop that led to the creation of *Elephant in the Room* was conducted in Southern India, it is safe to assume an Indian influence on her work (also discussed later in this paper). This paper, then, attempts to analyze her visuals in the context of menstrual activism and the Sabarimala controversy to reveal the feminist activist stance the visuals take. But before we get to the discussion of the Sabarimala Temple, it is imperative we understand stigmatization of menstruation, the imperative of concealment necessitated by this stigma status and the role of Manu Smriti and Hindu myth in excluding menstruating women from religious spaces.

2. MENSTRUAL STIGMA AND THE IMPERATIVE OF CONCEALMENT

The term stigma has an ancient Greek origin where it was used as a marker for slaves and criminals, a stain that spoils an individual’s identity and renders a person’s character as defected ([Goffman \(1963\)](#), [Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler \(2011\)](#)). According to Goffman, stigma is an “attribute that is deeply discrediting” ([Goffman \(1963\)](#), p. 3) that conveys notions of debasement through stereotypes. While distinguishing the visible and the invisible, Goffman classically defines stigma as an imputation that could either be readily perceptible or could be concealed but discreditable if revealed ([Goffman \(1963\)](#), [Kowalski & Chapple \(2000\)](#)). As per this theory, there exist three ways in which stigmatization works—detestation of the body ensuing from physical scarring and disfigurement; character defects such as mental disorders, and tribal stigmas associated with an individual’s identification as a member of a marginalised group. It is imperative to understand the distinction between discredited and discreditable to decipher how stigmas influence the behaviour and position of a stigmatised person in society. If a person is marked as discredited, this implies that the stigma is in the knowledge of other people. But if a person is spoken of as ‘discreditable’, it invokes a possibility of that individual being stigmatized if/when the concealed stigma is revealed and made visible to public spectacle or brought to knowledge. This fear of revelation of a person’s discreditable status rationalizes the imperative of secrecy and attempts to conceal the stigma [Kowalski & Chapple \(2000\)](#). When talking about how the stigmatised person acts, feminist psychologists [Kowalski & Chapple \(2000\)](#), p. 75 say that when others know or find out about the discredited person’s maculated reputation, the stigmatised person may try to make up for the loss caused by the stigma in some other way. Also,

a discreditable person is likely to take extreme measures and adopt 'disidentifiers' to keep the stain out of sight to avoid social stigma (Goffman (1963), p.41-44, Kowalski & Chapple (2000), p. 75.

When observed closely, one finds that menstruation fits well within the framework of Goffman's Stigma Theory. In the first category, menstrual blood acts as a physical marker of discredit due to its association with disgust and abhorrence Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011), Goffman (1963). Several women undergo ritualistic purification and deodorization to conceal their menstrual status. Furthermore, it is observed there is a stronger sense of aversion associated with menstrual blood that enforces the ideology that views menstruation as despicable Houppert (2000), Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011). Menstrual leakage and visible staining of clothes convey the idea of a blemished female character. This concept of stain extends to the emotional and physical anguish induced by a woman's premenstrual and menstrual stages. Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011). Any visible signs or display of menstruation, whether intentional or unintentional, stigmatise women as unclean, mentally irrational, and devoid of bodily control leading to their social distancing and shunning Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011), Lee (1994), Merskin (1999). The stigmatisation of menstruation can be further explained by Goffman's concept of tribal identity when seen in the context of identity traits of 'femaleness' Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011), p. 2, Merskin (1999). A girl's enculturation into the tribal identity of a female is considered to commence with menarche which is seen as a girl's initiation into womanhood Lee (1994), Merskin 1999). This is also the time when a girl's body is further differentiated from that of a boy as per the sociological norms of femininity and sexuality which controls her appearance and demeanour Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler (2011), Lee (1994). Menarche, thus, marks the beginning of a phase in a girl's life when parental control tightens due to concerns over any physical activity that may lead to pregnancy Lee (1994), and also marks the movement of a girl into the collective, tribal identity of womanhood where she is deprived of the privileges of an 'unstained' man's body. Menstrual blood, therefore, is constructed as a stigma that needs to be concealed and controlled. The stigma and shame around menstruation coupled with the gender expectations (of ideal femininity) leads to the silencing of women regarding menstrual exploitation that jeopardizes their safety and limits their agency.

3. MANU SMRITI, RAJASWALA DOSHA AND EXCLUSION

Manu Smriti, one of the most renowned works of Hindu Dharma literature that exhaustively sets out the Brahmanical code of conduct and instruction for males with regard to women and members of other castes within the four-tiered Hindu society, also engages with the concept of menstruation. It endorses the normative patriarchal discourse of Hinduism Leslie (1994) that categorises menstruating women as low-caste individuals, impure, capable of polluting and threatening the status of Brahmin men through mere touch, sex, and food-sharing. Apart from setting menstruation within the context of bodily impurity and caste system, it perceives women as innately impure beings Leslie (1994), a conception that has its origin in the mythic, Vedic story that strings together women, menstruation, brahmanicide and sexuality. As per the legend, Lord Indra committed brahminicide by killing the half-demon brahmin named Vritra. To absolve his sin, he appealed to the earth, trees and women and gave each of them one-third of his sin in exchange for a blessing. Once women took over his guilt, it manifested in the form of menstruation also referred to as the *Rajaswala Dosha*, an occurrence that reminded of the worst sin in Hindu ideology and the resultant guilt Keith (1914), thus,

bolstering the conception of menstruation as the worst blunder in the Brahminical Hindu mythos. Owing to the internalization of such ideology, women voluntarily refrain from entering the temples when menstruating, making them feel segregated, restraining their mobility and violating their right to prayer. Due to these deeply entrenched patriarchal norms, women often develop a toxic relationship with their bodies.

4. THE SABARIMALA TEMPLE AND THE SHRINE OF MALIKAPPURATTAMMA

The debate over the association of menstruation and sexuality with dirt and threat garnered much public attention during the eruption of the Sabarimala temple controversy in 2018 when in a historical verdict, the apex court of India lifted an age-old ban on the entry of women inside the temple which was otherwise configured as an all-male space. The Sabarimala temple, located in the southern Indian state of Kerala, is one of the most prominent Hindu temples devoted to the veneration of the deity Ayyappan. Every year, the temple witness throngs of male pilgrims who travel from different parts of India to worship the idol. Due to the immense footfall, the site generates large revenue through the sale of religious offerings and other economic activities, making it an important economic center of Kerala [Lisbon & Muraleedharan. \(2008\)](#). Since the temple and its grounds are almost entirely male-dominated, women are not only barred from engaging in religious activities, but also excluded from other economic activities in the region. Prior to the apex court ruling in 2018, the law forbade women to undertake a pilgrimage not only during their menstruation phase but throughout the year. This made the Sabarimala temple case different from apparently similar cases of discriminatory access to places of worship. To further understand the issue, the grounds on which the ban was defended against abrogation by the Sabarimala temple trust must be understood. Lord Ayyappan is a hyper-masculine, celibate deity presiding at Sabarimala temple. He is said to have attained divinity during the age of adolescence, a period of celibacy [Osella & Osella \(2003\)](#) and indulgence in any form of sexual activity would lead to a deprivation of his divine power and status. The importance of celibacy in the Hindu belief system and its association with masculinity and the power of male sexuality has long been studied by anthropologists. According to A Dictionary of Hinduism, practicing chastity generates heat in the body (*tapas*) that lends indomitable strength to the practitioner that can even challenge the gods. In Hindu mythology, one can find many stories of seduction where the ascetics were lured by women (femme fatales with unchecked sexuality) into breaking their vow of chastity, thus draining their power and strength. As rightly observed by [Millet \(2000\)](#),

Patriarchal religion and ethics tend to lump together as if the whole burden of the onus and stigma it attaches to sex which is known to be unclean, sinful and debilitating act pertains to the female and the male identity is preserved, as a human, rather than the sexual one. (p. 51)

Given this perceived threat, the mere presence of a fertile woman in front of Lord Ayyappan is viewed as dangerous and sinful by men and several pro-ban women who publicly protested against the entry of female activists inside the Sabarimala Temple in 2018 [Kochukudy \(2018\)](#).

Other myths about Lord Ayyappan also endorse the reliance on celibacy for attaining and preserving male power. Before he attained divine status, Lord Ayappan defeated a lady demon who had wreaked havoc in the southern area. Upon

defeat, the demon turned out to be a beautiful woman who was doomed to a miserable life as a demon. As a token of gratitude, she offered herself to him as his bride. But he turned the offer down and expressed his desire to retire on a hilltop and attend to the prayers of his devotees. To pacify her, he agreed to get into a matrimonial relationship with her only when no new devotees would undertake the yearly pilgrimage for his veneration. It is believed that since then Lord Ayyappan's unmarried bride, who is worshipped under the name Malikappurattamma, is waiting for him in a nearby shrine [Dutta \(2018\)](#). To save Lord Ayyappan from the obligation of this matrimony and to save him from losing his divine powers, seasoned pilgrims take up the responsibility to initiate new pilgrims every year. Apart from this, the notion of segregation and contamination associated with menstruating women is performed through one of the temple rituals. A procession of Lord Ayyappan is carried out on the second day of Makaram to the shrine of Malikappurattamma. Upon arrival, all torches miraculously extinguish declaring that she is menstruating. Following this, the rear part of her shrine is covered with a red cloth and since the goddess is in a polluted condition, Lord Ayyappan is compelled to retreat without even getting a glimpse of her. [Osella & Osella \(2003\)](#).

A contentious, misogynistic statement offered by the head of the Travancore Devaswom Board about the topic of women's entrance to the Sabarimala temple further complicates the understanding of the genuine basis for the women's ban from the temple premises. While equating menstruating women to potential criminals whose bodies must always be under surveillance, he remarked:

A time will come when people will ask if all women should be disallowed from entering the temple throughout the year. These days there are machines that can scan bodies and check for weapons. There will be a day when a machine is invented to scan bodies if it is the 'right time' for a woman to enter the temple. When that machine is invented, we will talk about letting women inside. [The News Minute \(2015\)](#)

This statement led to a huge outrage among the public. While emulating the twenty-year-old activist Nikita Azad and her friends, countless women protested online by uploading photos of themselves holding sanitary pads with the phrase "Happy to Bleed." This online movement is seen as a landmark event in battling menstrual taboo in India. Women, however, could not form a united front since there were also women in favour of the ban who rose to initiate a counter-campaign, #Readytowait, where they announced their resolve to stay away from the temple till the age of fifty claiming the restrictions to be non-discriminatory, put in place for the observance of celibacy of Lord Ayyappan.

5. MENSTRUATION AND THE DRAVIDIAN WORLDVIEW

Even though the Brahmanical way of looking at menstruation may be seen as the norm, the bleeding-goddess rhetoric within the Dravidian worldview conversely treats menstruation as a propitious occurrence, a divine gift to mankind. These two paradoxical schools of thought within a single religion exhibit a plurality of responses to menstruation beyond the framework of contamination, inauspiciousness and prohibitions. Examples of this may be found in the literature of the Sangam period (100–500 CE), which endorses a Dravidian worldview, a forerunner of the Brahmanical religious system that later gained power and dominance over the Indian subcontinent. Sangam literature is replete with references to *ananku*, a precursor to the concept of divine power 'Shakti' that has the miraculous potential to enliven, animate and energize. Similarly, *ananku* is a phenomenon of divine vivifying force that gets imbued into a woman's body during

menarche, menstruation, and the time following childbirth (Jenett (2005), p. 177). This spiritual force associated with menstruation is exemplified by the menstrual goddess who resides in the Mahadevar Temple in Chengannur, which is located in the state of Kerala. The goddess' menstrual garment is deemed so fortunate and potent that it is auctioned off every time she menstruates (Jenett (2005), p. 181, Joseph (2015)). Similarly, at the Kamakhya Devi Temple in Guwahati, Assam, the deity's *yoni*, or vagina is worshipped, and the goddess Kamakhya, also referred to as the 'bleeding goddess' is venerated in the state of menstruation. The sanctum sanctorum or the 'garvagriha,' where the presiding deity of the Hindu temple is housed, is seen as the mythical womb or vagina of the goddess Shakti Priya (2017), Jalan (2020). Also, a striking resemblance in the form of the idol in the Kamakhya Devi temple (see Figure 3) and Pagalies' temple (see Figure 2) allow the readers to decipher the visual as a celebration of divinity and purity associated with menstruation, equating the celebration of menstruation with the worship of divinity.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Menstruating Goddess Idol at Kamakhya Devi Temple, Assam

Figure 3 ALT-TEXT: Squatting Goddess Kamakhya in her menstruation.

6. MENSTRUAL ART AND PAGALIES’ LEAKY TEMPLE

Ruth Green-Cole (2020) in her work *Painting Blood: Visualizing Menstrual Blood in Art* observes how the absence of menstruation from dominant discourses and representations has been a primary strategy to perpetuate menstrual stigma. Until 1970 when radical feminist art emerged, art history was largely dominated by ideals of patriarchy and maintained a culture of expunction and invisibility around menstruation. Second Wave feminist artist Judy Chicago's Red Flag, a photolithograph that featured the artist removing a blood-drenched tampon from her vagina, heralded menstrual art that undid the culture of invisibility and attempted to bring the otherwise peripheral subject of menstruation into the

mainstream. Since then, many artists have gravitated toward the depictions of menstruation and have pedestalized it in the realm of high art. These artists, however, have faced harsh criticism for their frank depictions of a taboo theme that highlight the continuing ignominy around it. By making a forbidden issue public, these artworks are essential in reducing the stigma associated with it. The otherwise frank depictions of the 'unpalatable truth' startle the onlookers into an awareness that had never been experienced before due to strategic omission in the past. Menstrual artworks are far more potent when seen as a medium with immense revelatory potential. They disclose what is normally concealed by creating places of resistance to accepted norms and behaviour dictated by patriarchal society. Unbridled by these norms and expectations, period artists engage in an exposition of their blood (sometimes using their menstrual blood as a paint), bodies, and emotions. Pagalies' depiction of a menstruating temple/body fits into this feminist tradition of challenging the idea of menstruation as dirt and impurity and challenges the idea of concealment.

Such artworks, then, become a celebration of 'leaky bodies' Irigaray et al. (1985) associated with the weaker sex that is held in contrast to the sealed men's bodies. As per Irigaray, "[f]luids are implicitly associated with femininity, maternity, menstruation and the body. Fluids are subordinated to that which is concrete and solid" Irigaray et al. (1985), p. 113. The persistent concealment and social stigmatization of the reproductive body (such as menstruation etiquette, confinement of expectant mothers, and the sexualization of the female breasts) have contributed to the misconception that a leaky body is abnormal and that such a body is normal only when it is covered and concealed. Consequently, the female body is seen as something that needs to be managed to fit into the ideal of 'normal' prescribed by society. Menstruation, particularly, has been classified as an uncontrolled phenomenon that calls for organization, management, and containment. The expression of radical feminist thought in such artworks has been instrumental in challenging such portrayals of women by forging new terrains of exploration of women's voices by bringing their cloaked, mundane realities out in the bright. Pagalies' temple depicts not a trickle but a gush of vibrant red blood symbolic of unbridled passion, life, vitality, and fluidity emerging from the temple structure in what can be read as a blatant defiance of the patriarchal tendencies of containment and control. The blood can be seen flowing unthwarted past the two tigers (often deciphered as symbolic of patriarchy) Brittlebank (1995), which seem to wait and serve the menstruating goddess. The skillful use of watercolours (strategically used to celebrate feminine fluidity) in varied shades of red and earthy browns pulls the audience into the realm of the carnal, visceral world of menstruation, thus, lending it immense expressive potential.

7. ABSTRACTION AND MALE GAZE

The male gaze in art goes back hundreds of years when men made art for other men to purchase or/and look at, wherein women were showcased in various ways to serve the male gaze Berger (2008), Mulvey (1989), Hoover (2017). Similar is the case with movies and even comics that were crafted in a fashion that perpetuated the patriarchal ideals of society. Pagalies' bleeding temple pushes back the male gaze through a dexterous use of abstraction in presenting the female body as a holy shrine that denies a fixity of meaning and identity to it. While talking about abstraction in comics in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud states that abstraction is not about removing features from a work of art but about concentrating on certain elements by reducing the picture to its

fundamental meaning and magnifying it, something that a realistic painting cannot achieve. By abstracting the woman’s body as a temple, Pagalies subverts the male gaze and diverts the audience’s/readers’ attention toward a host of symbols and motifs built into the temple structure that buttresses the concept of purity and divinity that is artistically dovetailed to female sexuality and menstruation. Also, the process of abstraction allows the readers to not see someone else’s face in the visual but themselves by rendering the visual a universal identification. By identifying their bodies with the divine even in the so-called state of impurity, women readers will be able to make peace with their bodies and see it with veneration and not disgust, a very potent message that Pagalies sends out through this artwork for the empowerment of female audiences. Having broached the idea of empowerment this study will now engage in an exposition of certain motifs and archetypes to further explain the abovementioned stance.

8. THE MOTHER AND THE MENSTRUATOR

Glick & Fiske (2001) posit that the mother archetype is held in high esteem in cultures across the world. However, a woman in her menstruating phase is considered unclean, polluting, and inherently dangerous Buckley & Gottlieb (1988). In Pagalies’ visual, these two conflicting archetypes are craftily fused to highlight the inherent divinity in both, thus elevating a leaky menstruating body to that of the lactating mother’s body which is venerated for its regenerative force. The lactation is depicted as sprouting brown coconuts placed in the temple structure in a manner that conjures the image of the female bosom. In Hinduism, coconut is an indispensable part of Hindu rituals as it is offered to Gods and is even gifted to the guests during holy ceremonies. Known as *Shriphal* (God’s fruit) that grows on *Devavriksha* (the tree of God), it serves as a symbol of nourishment and sustenance. Furthermore, coconuts symbolize fertility and are bestowed upon women wishing to bear children Ahuja et al. (2014). The coconuts spurting water in the visual can be read as a celebration of a woman’s fecundity and alimetal capacity. However, in our society, breasts are viewed not only as a symbol of motherhood (essentially non-sexual) but also as a site of sexual pleasure and debauchery. Pagalies reconcile these otherwise conflicting discourses by tying these two paradoxical symbols. Moreover, by equating the figure of motherhood with the figure of a supposedly chastity-threatening, bleeding femme fatale, Pagalies conjures an emotion of reverence for the menstruating body. While debunking the notions of pollution and isolation, Pagalies paints the menstrual blood emanating from what resembles a vulva as if it is a red carpet rolled out in celebration of femininity which is in stark contrast to the placement of the red cloth in the rear part of the shrine of Malikkapurattamma. Through this visual element, she upends the idea of pollution and isolation in the most pronounced manner. Moreover, she presents female genitalia as an entry point to access the divine whose access is not limited to just one entrance. Upon close observation, one can find an alternate pathway to get into the temple that doesn’t have the menstrual red carpet laid out. This can be read as an expression of reverence and religion-spiritual validation even for those women that do not menstruate, who are otherwise looked down upon by society.

9. THE (RE)EMERGENCE OF THE RED VRITRA

While rendering a subaltern, women-centric reading of the Rig Veda, which records women as objects rather than subjects, Janet Chawla broaches an

alternative perspective to the *Indra-Vritra* animosity that is instrumental in understanding the origin of the Vedic ideology of menstruation which denigrates female physiological processes and ironically exalts the patriarchal institution of motherhood (*Aditi*). Her theory links Vritra, mythically and allegorically, to the pre-patriarchal, pre-Vedic era that was predominantly matrilineal and viewed femininity as sacred. In Rig Veda, *Vritra* is mentioned as a serpent with the power of thunder, lightning, and illusion. Chawla notes that all the demons of the Rig Veda, including Vritra, are identified by matronymics instead of the now dominant patronymics, for *Vritra* is a *Danava*, the son of *Danu*. Vritra's mythic dismembering and annihilation mark the subsequent paradigm shift from matrilineal social order to a male-valorising, patriarchal worldview. The emergence of a serpent from the temple structure in the visual can be read as envisaging the return of an epoch where femininity is consecrated and restoring the otherwise marginalized women to the mainstream. Also, by invoking serpentine imagery, Pagalies seems to be calling upon all menstruants to unload the internalized patriarchy and self-loathing by ending an age-old war against their bodies, just as a snake undergoes the process of moulting to emerge anew.

10. MIGHTIER SHRINE, BLOODIED LEGS AND CLENCHED FIST

In another visual of the same collection, reverence for the menstruating body is evoked by the scale difference Goffman (1976) of the shrine when held in contrast with the image of Saint Basil's Cathedral, a popular cultural and religious location in Russia that is positioned on the bottom right corner of the page along the margins. Readers are presented with a dominant figure of the female body placed at the centre of the page with its red-colored legs spread to reveal a clenched fist symbol in place of the vulva. The icon of a clenched fist has political significance and a persistent symbol of resistance and solidarity). The clenched fist has been a steadfast emblem of protest and defiance for many years. It exudes a potent aura of conviction, fortitude, and solidarity. When individuals thrust their fists skyward, they signal their readiness to battle for their cause, their refusal to accept subjugation or suppression, and their solidarity with fellow fighters for justice. This iconic symbol has been wielded to great effect in diverse contexts throughout history, including labor disputes, civil rights struggles, feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, and movements against tyranny and oppression. It has evolved into a universal sign of resistance and revolt, embodying the spirit of resistance to inequality and oppression. The clenched fist is not just a symbol, but a rallying cry for people to unite for a common purpose. When people observe the defiant fist, they recognize that they are not alone and that there are others who are equally committed to the cause Korff & Drost (1993), *Political Symbols*. (n.d.). This makes the clenched fist an immensely effective instrument for mobilizing communities and achieving meaningful change. As a sign of ceremonial welcome, the clenched fist emblem put in the menstruation female body presented as a shrine links the personal with the political and calls for a united struggle against menstrual taboo and bring meaningful change in society. Furthermore, what is also worth noticing is that in the visual, the menstrual flow doubles up as all-red 'bloodied legs.' The profusion of blood on the legs showcases a similar excess, the gush that was noticed in the previous visual (Figure 2). Legs serve a very crucial function in the human body as it enables one to stand and locomote. Menstrual blood as legs can be read as indicating the significance of the gendered blood Lupton (1993), p. 3 as the very base of any religion on which the shrine stands and a process through which religion locomotes from generation to generation. The clenched fist together with the blood-

drenched legs of the magnanimous signifies menstrual protest that calls for reverence and recognition of the value of the gendered blood. It seems to be proposing to the readers that their interaction with religion and the divine is incomplete without the recognition of a shrine that is much larger than any notable shrine in the world.

11. CONCLUSION

Through a meticulous examination of various visual elements and motifs interwoven within its fabric, Pagalies endeavours to highlight the pervasive influence of power dynamics in the denigration of menstrual practices, as enshrined in the ancient Vedic texts, which persistently afflict women in modern times. Her work is imbued with evocative imagery harkening back to the Dravidian era, serving as a call to restore the erstwhile reverence accorded to matrilineal lineage and the sanctity of the feminine form. However controversial such artworks may be, they unsettle the power structures by questioning the long-held beliefs of a society with the hope to bring about a change in spectators’ perceptions. Through his illustration, Mitra, too, had hoped to make altars accessible to menstruating women. The discussion in the paper postulates how Pagalies’ artworks also work in the same direction- to remind people, especially women, of their innate power, to undo the internalized self-loathing, and concomitantly dissolve the divide among women as a tribe by reconciling the conventional polarity of menstruation and divinity. The positioning and alignment of the female body with temples and religious paraphernalia disavows taboos around menstruation and debunks patriarchal modes of representation by carving a democratic vista for feminine expression. By foregrounding, magnifying, and evoking a sense of reverence for the gendered blood, Pagalies registers her protest against the culture of invisibility and concealment through the excessive exhibition of female blood. The centrality of women as temple figures highlights the irony and hypocrisy of their exclusion from shrines, questions their lack of access to alters and attempts to destigmatize menstruation. Her visuals, therefore, advocate the permission of females into temples just as menstrual art supports the entry of menstruation into the mainstream.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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