Power of the Menstrual Period

In recent culture, it has become common for many women to speak ill about their menstrual periods. Women rarely speak of it with a smile on their face, and when they do speak of it, they refer to it in a sarcastic tone or as one who cannot be bothered with such inconvenient occurrences. Even the media, mostly through commercials and advertisements have taken the monthly period and have referred to it as anything but glamorous. Men, as well, want nothing to do with menstruation, and will quietly exit a room when a woman begins speaking about it. It has been noted in other cultures that menstruation is supposed to remain a secret, a private affair meant only to be known by the woman whose period it is. Still, periods are now being portrayed in a negative light by women all over the world, and many women go so far as to say they dread when their time of the month comes.

Why do they dread it though? Many women dread the symptoms that accompany their periods. Others hate the symptoms that come a week before their periods referred to as Premenstrual Syndrome or PMS. Other times, it is the timing of the periods that women cannot stand and how it can interfere with planned events or intercourse. Many women who have irregular periods are annoyed by the inconsistency of their periods, making them impossible to track. Also, a period can pose a problem when a woman is either trying to get pregnant, or hoping she is not. Why is it that many women dread all these things that accompany their periods, though?

For one thing, the cramps, fatigue and bloating that accompany a period can often make a woman feel lazy, overweight, and unwanted. No woman ever wants to feel like that, especially when these feelings occur as frequently as once a month. With the self image issues many
women are faced with today, this is definitely a reason as to why a woman would not want to be bothered by her period.

Even before a woman gets her period, however, there is about a week long time span in which a woman becomes moody, often experiencing mood swings, and cravings for unhealthy food. She may experience tenderness and soreness in her breasts, and lower back, and might often experience headaches. This is never a state anyone would want to be in as it is, as one would expect, extremely uncomfortable.

Timing can also be an issue for many women because of the frequency at which they menstruate. The average cycle lasts between 28-35 days, and sometimes it seems to come too often. Many women count ahead trying to predict if their next time falls on an event they have planned and are looking forward to. They then end up praying and hoping that perhaps their period will end just before, or start the day after said planned event. Additionally, many women do not want their periods to interfere with when they want to have intercourse, since many men tend to find it unappealing to be with a woman sexually when it is her time.

Surprisingly, more women than not often find themselves with the problem of irregularity in their periods. Being unable to predict something that can be a hassle when it catches a woman off guard can be extremely infuriating. Coincidentally, this can be an issue for women who are trying to get pregnant, or are trying to avoid getting pregnant. An irregular cycle means irregular times when a woman is ovulating, which makes it very difficult to judge when and when not to have intercourse. Also, a period that is irregular and decides to come late can be very misleading when it comes to avoiding and trying to get pregnant.
Menstruation has been poorly represented and already has many reasons against it as to why many women want nothing to do with it. By weeding out the bad, and picking out the good, however, one will come to realize that the menstrual period is a symbol of power and control. Even the time of the month when a woman is ovulating is actually biologically a very powerful occurrence in women over men. The power that is hidden in the natural occurrence of the female body is astounding and examples can be found in literature, such as *The Red Tent*, as well as in scientific studies proving that females hold much more power than what is believed in patriarchal societies.

*The Red Tent* is a perfect example of the adoration and respect women should hold for their bodies when it comes to menstruation. The women in *The Red Tent* knew of the power that had been bestowed upon them when they menstruated every month. They saw the process of menstruation as a reminder of the power they held within them to give life; in particular, give life to men, therefore giving men their power, the very same power they exercise over women in every day patriarchal societies. If it were not for women, men would not be living; therefore they would not be able to control and suppress women.

The women of *The Red Tent* also understood that menstruation was a blood sacrifice. Every month, they had to sacrifice blood to remind them of the powerful ability they had with their bodies. They needed to sacrifice a bit of their own life, or blood, in order to give life through child birth. It was, and still is a powerful reminder to many women that they have the power of fertility. In *The Red Tent*, Leah, Dinah’s mother, explains this concept in order to help her daughter better understand why menstruation should be appreciated as opposed to hated,
In the red tent, the truth is known. In the red tent, where days pass like a gentle stream, as the gift of Innana courses through us, cleansing the body of last month’s death, preparing the body to receive the new month’s life, women give thanks—for repose and restoration, for the knowledge that life comes from between our legs and that life costs blood (*The Red Tent*, 158).

As Leah explained to Dinah, menstruation is not only a gift of power, but also a gift of cleansing. An entire month’s build up of hardship and stress collects itself in the womb. Then, when a woman no longer can bear the weight of it any long, usually after a month’s time, her body begins to release it, cleansing itself and preparing for the following month. The stripping of the uterine lining parallels the stripping and removing of those hardships and times of stress. In *The Red Tent* this time of cleansing was even honored and treated like a vacation. As if collecting and releasing a month’s worth of hardship and life required a woman to take a break from the world, the raising of children, the demands of a husband, and the strain of housework. It is nature’s way of telling the female body, “You have worked hard enough this month. Here is a reason for a well earned break.”

Ask any woman who has experienced child birth, and she will say that labor pains are just more powerful and more frequent menstrual cramps. It makes perfect sense, too. When a woman is menstruating, her cramps are her uterine muscles contracting, trying to expel unwanted blood and lining from the uterus. In childbirth, this is the same thing except instead of only blood and uterine lining, these muscles are trying to push out something worth much more work, therefore resulting in more powerful cramps, or contractions.
Women should be thankful for menstrual cramps, then. It is the body’s way of slowly introducing women to the pain of child birth instead of just throwing them right into a pain they have never experience, and therefore do not know what to expect from it. It builds them up and prepares them for the sacrifice of experiencing extreme pain in order to give life.

One would expect that the biological power of a woman over a man would end with her menstrual period, but it is in fact extended to a time that occurs half way between menstrual periods. Ovulation is the act of a mature egg leaving the ovaries, traveling down the fallopian tubes, and coming to rest in the uterus. Obviously, there is an extreme change occurring in the woman, but in addition to dropping a mature egg into her uterus, a woman will experience more subtle, and even surprising changes that occur on a much more primal human level.

All living creatures have an innate desire to create genetically superior offspring, and the modern human is no different. Saul L. Miller and John K. Maner point out in their article “Ovulation as a male mating prime: Subtle signs of women’s fertility influence men’s mating cognition and behavior” that

“Mating with a genetically superior man around the time of ovulation increases the likelihood of bearing genetically fit offspring. Consequently, when approaching ovulation, women engage in activities designed to secure genetic benefits from potential mates, in turn, maximizing the reproductive fitness gains afforded by their high level of fertility (Maner and Miller, 2)”.

During this time of ovulation, the female body makes some subtle changes, one of these changes being scent. Maner and Miller explain, “A small number of studies have indicated that
men subjectively evaluate the odors of women close to ovulation as more pleasant-smelling than the odors of women far from ovulation. Moreover, scents of women near ovulation can lean to men displaying heightened levels of testosterone (Maner and Miller, 2)…”

Once again, it would seem that even during ovulation, women have the power to control men, and even appear more attractive to them, all for the sake of creating the most superior offspring. One wonders if this played any kind of part in The Red Tent when Jacob first met his future wives. Perhaps the women all felt such a strong attraction to him because, being that they all lived together, they all must have been ovulating together.

Apart from scent, there are also subtle changes in the pitch of a woman’s voice, skin-tone, and body ratio. These changes can be thought of as a fisherman baiting a lure. If he casts a line with nothing but a rubber worm on the end, his is not going to catch anything impressive or useful to him. If the fisherman uses something a little more attractive, however, he suddenly has power over all of the nearby fish, who will not be able to resist this trap. This metaphor further proves that some of the less acknowledged processes of the menstrual cycle, such as ovulation, also hold a power that includes sex appeal that many women do not take into consideration when complaining about their periods.

A fear of the menstrual cycle has been present among humans since the beginning of history. There are many cultures all over the world that view it as a curse, and as a taboo. Sharon Faye Koren discusses the behavior of the Jewish and Christian cultures during medieval times in her article “The Menstruant as “Other” in Medieval Judaism and Christianity” describing the fear of women on their periods and how they often were referred to as “impure”. By being deemed impure women were forced to refrain from worship in the Temple as well as sexual
intercourse with their husbands. Eventually, centuries later, Jewish culture would become a little more lenient towards menstruating women and would only prohibit them from doing anything that may lead to intercourse with their husbands during menstruation, such as sharing his bed.

Furthermore, the ancient world had wild misconception about menstruation. All of these misconceptions, as it comes as no surprise, were believed by ancient Greek and Roman scholars. Koren elaborates “Ancient Greek and Roman authors believed that menstrual blood could be used for both good and evil; it could cure disease and drive away stormy weather and vermin, but it could also cause abortion and kill crops (Koren, 41).” As further elaboration as to how misinformed men were, and sometimes still are, when it comes to menstruation, Koren quotes Isidore, the bishop of Seville and his definition of menstrual blood,

A woman’s superfluous blood: it is termed “menstrual,” because of the phase of the moon by which this flow comes about. The moon is called mênê in Greek. These are also called the “womanlies,” muliebria, for women are the only menstruating animal. On contact with this blood, crops do not germinate, new wines go sour, grasses die, trees lose their fruit, iron is corrupted by rust, air and copper are blackened; which should dogs eat of it, they are made rabid. Even bituminous glue, which is dissolved neither by iron nor by [strong] waters, polluted by this gore, falls apart by itself (Koren, 41).

It is unfathomable to think that people, or more so men, used to view menstruation in this way. For some inconceivable reason it has capture the fascination of mankind in the most curious of ways. Even pop culture has hopped on the bandwagon, taking menstruation and turning it into
something it never should be. Umme Busra Fatena Sultana, in her article “The Imageries of Menstruation in Sanitary Napkin Ads: Representation and the Practice of Discourse as a Marketing Strategy”, mentions how menstruation is even a gateway to sexuality, and that the beginning of menstruation in a woman’s life opens that woman up to being more easily influenced by the negative social pressures of sex. “Identifying menstruation as a starting point for sexual capacity, a significant number of researchers explore how women’s bodies and identities have been controlled, shaped, and influenced by the larger cultural, religious, and social environment (Sultana).”

It is saddening to know that a gift as precious as menstruation is now being used as leverage to pressure women into being sexual beings as dictated by popular culture. It is not only disrespectful to women, but also to human life, since it is because of women, and menstruation, that life is even possible in the first place.

This valuable concept of having power over life represented in menstruation appears to be lost on the modern world. Women have an outstanding ability to create life, and even subconsciously attract a mate without even realizing it and these natural wonders are often wished away. Perhaps someday soon, more women will discover that menstrual periods are actually a beautiful concept and that they hold more biological power over men then they realize. Perhaps that day will come sooner rather than later, and when that happens, women will finally be able to see just how truly fantastic they are, and what a miraculous gift they possess.

Works Cited


