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FOLKTALES AND MENSTRUATION: A STUDY IN "A FLOWERING TREE"

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation has always been an indispensable part of all the civilizations of the world. The discussion on the subject is limitless; it escapes from the body and experiences of a woman and finds expression in religion, literature and sociology of civilizations and cultures from the beginning of times. There are myriad views on menstruation—some consider it to be a blessing and others interpret it as curse. The subject pervades many cultural taboos, folktales, oral traditions and myths. The present paper attempts to analyse the implications of menstruation in Indian culture. The paper undertakes the study of "A Flowering Tree" a folktale from India and analyses in what different ways menstruation has been comprehended in oral tradition. The story conveys the idea of the unavoidability of Menstruation in a woman's life. The folktales also hint at the vulnerability of a woman's reproductive health and of the fact that her process of menstruation gains fruition when she gets married and has children. The regressive idea since ages which sees menstruation more as a curse than a blessing, is also challenged in the paper. The story seems to be an expression of Helene Cixous' idea of "white ink" –the female experiences specific to the body of a woman and seem to form a part of the body of writings labeled as *ericture feminine*.

Keywords: Folktales, Menstruation, Sexuality, Reproductive Health, *Ericture Feminine*

Menstruation has always been an indispensable part of all the civilizations of the world. The discussion on the subject is limitless; it escapes from the body and experiences of a woman and finds expression in religion, literature and sociology of civilizations and cultures from the beginning of times. There are myriad views on menstruation—some consider it to be a blessing and others interpret it as curse. The subject pervades many cultural taboos, folktales, oral traditions and myths. The present paper attempts to analyse the implications of menstruation in Indian culture. The paper undertakes the study of "A Flowering Tree" a folktale from India and analyses in what different ways menstruation has been comprehended in oral tradition. The story is woman-centric. As A.K. Ramanujan says, "A woman's culturally constructed life-forms, her meaning-universe, is different from a man's in such tales. This simple-minded essay is meant to further the exploration of this universe of women's discourse." (Ramanujan, *Oral Traditions* 227)

The story conveys the idea of the unavoidability of Menstruation in a woman's life. The folktales also hint at the vulnerability of a woman's reproductive health and of the fact that her process of menstruation gains fruition when she gets married and has children. The regressive idea since ages which sees menstruation more as a curse than a blessing, is also challenged in the paper. The story seems to be an expression of Helene Cixous' idea of "white ink" –the female experiences specific to the body of a woman and seem to form a part of the body of writings labeled as *Eriecture Feminine*. (Cixous, *The Laugh of the Medusa*) The folktale seems to stem from the female physiology, which is celebrated and venerated in the story.

"A Flowering Tree" is a Kannada folktale which appears in English translation in A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*. The folktale shows a strong connection between woman and nature. As Kushugal says, "Stories like the Flowering tree carry concern for nature and women suffering as a tree as well." (71) The metaphoric connections between a tree and a woman are many and varied in the culture. A relevant one here is that the words for "flowering" and "menstruation" are the same in languages like Sanskrit and Tamil. In Sanskrit, a menstruating woman is called a *puspavati*, "a woman in flower," and in Tamil, *pūttal* ("flowering") means **menstruation**. Menstruation itself is a form and a metaphor for a woman's special creativity. Thus a woman's biological and other kinds of creativity are symbolized by flowering. In this tale, the metaphor is literalized and extended. The protagonist literally becomes a tree, producing flowers without number over and over again, as the occasion requires. It is similar to her power of menstruation which symbolizes fertility and fecundity. It is her special gift, which she does not wish to squander or even display. The experience is similar to people of Indian households where talking about menstruation in front of the male members of the family is a hush-hush affair.

The plot of "The Flowering Tree" is this: There lived a poor woman in a certain town with her two daughters. The younger daughter decides to help her impoverished family. She gains the ability to turn into a beautiful tree by performing strange magical rituals with her older sister. They carefully perform the ritual which requires two pitchers of water - one to transform the younger to a tree and the other back to human form. Her older sister plucks flowers from the transformed tree making sure that she doesn't damage any other part of the tree. She then converts her younger sister to human form. They weave the fragrant flowers into garlands and sell them at the King's palace. They decide to keep this a secret from their mother and save the money for future.

One day the prince discovers those garlands in the palace and gets curious about them. He follows the girls back to their house. Next morning at dawn, he goes to their house and hides himself behind a tree and eventually sees the secret origin of flowers. He then asks his parents (King and Queen) to marry the girl that sold flowers and tells them the secret. The minister summons the mother of the girl and gives the marriage proposal. She could not help but agree. The prince's wish to marry a woman who could turn into a tree with fresh, invigorating flowers actually hints at the man's desire to have a young wife with good reproductive health, who could be full of youthful vigour and fecundity at the same time.

After the wedding, several nights pass without him speaking to her or touching her. The prince shows his desire for her in the following words— "The other day I saw you become a beautiful tree. I saw you with my own eyes. If you don't become a tree for me, for whom will you do it? He chided her." (Ramanujan, *Folktales from India* 136) Finally he makes his demand: she must transform herself for him.

Ashamed, she resists, but finally relents and performs the ceremony for him. Her envious sister-in-law watched her do the transformation on one night. Later, she forces her to transform into a tree and breaks her branches while plucking the flowers with her friends. She also ignores the water ritual and pours water on her indifferently, here and there. When the princess changes to the human form, she has no hands and feet. She has only half of her human body. A wounded carcass, she crawls into a gutter.

Next morning a cotton wagon driver spots her and rescues her from gutter and leaves her at a ruined pavilion in a town. The King of the town where she has been dumped happens to be the husband of her husband's elder sister. The palace servants inform the queen about her. She is brought to the palace, bathed, healed and kept at the main door as a "thing" for decoration. Meanwhile, the prince distraught at her wife's

disappearance assumes that she left him due to his arrogance. Full of remorse, he turns into a beggar and wanders across the country.

After a long time, the prince haggard and unrecognizable reaches her elder sister's town. In shock, the Queen recognizes her brother and brings him to the palace where he is bathed and fed. He never utters a single word. His sister was worried and tried all sorts of ways to make him speak. One day she sent the half body of his wife in a hope that the beauty would move him. He immediately recognizes his lost wife. She told him the complete incident. She asked him to perform the ritual and fix all her broken branches and then transform her back to human form in a hope that she would be normal again. She says to him: "Pour the water from this pitcher over me, and I'll become a tree. Wherever there is a broken branch, set it right. Wherever a leaf is torn, bind it together. Then pour the water of the second pitcher from over the tree." (142)

These words reinstate the need to take care of a woman's reproductive health, which can only be taken care of if one treats a woman with love, care and patience. When the prince does that, his wife's health and lost power of menstruation, symbolically conveyed by the ability to regain the blooming of flowers, is resumed. Finally, the elder sister of the prince bids them farewell. The King (prince's father) is overjoyed at the return of his long lost son and daughter [-in-law. After discovering the bitter truth, the king has seven barrels of burning lime poured into a great pit and throws his youngest daughter into it as a punishment for ill-treating her sister-in-law and jeopardizing her health.

Thus we see that the story talks about the vulnerability and sexuality of a woman when she starts menstruating. The breaking of the branches symbolizes the ill-treatment of the girl who is menstruating and warns the society to take care of the reproductive health of women, which if neglected will lead her to develop gynecological disorders and stop the sexual union between husband and wife. It will also have an adverse effect on the emotional and mental health of a woman. It might even be a reason for separation between the husband and wife as in the story; the woman is separated with her husband. When finally the woman is taken care of, she is properly attended to, her branches are put in place, she is healed again. The story hints at the idea that a woman's reproductive and menstrual health should be of utmost importance in a marriage.

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A Brief bio of corresponding author

Dr. Pratima Chaitanya is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Jagat Taran Girls' Degree College, University of Allahabad, Allahabad. She has more than 10 years of teaching experience and is a prolific writer. She has published several research papers and articles in National and International journals. She is also a creative writer and has published several poems in various magazines of national and international repute. She has also authored two books.