

Scarlet Words: Menstruation Myths, Cultural Narratives, and Modern Literature

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation remains shrouded in silence and stigma across South Asia, where patriarchal and caste ideologies frame the bleeding body as polluting, while public-health discourse reduces it to a hygiene deficit. Although critical menstruation studies have consolidated as an interdisciplinary field, menstruation as a literary trope in South Asian women's writing has received little sustained close-reading attention, and indigenous sacred epistemologies are seldom placed in critical dialogue with feminist literary theory. This qualitative study closely reads Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, Bama, Meena Kandasamy, H. Lavanya, and Rupī Kaur through gynocriticism, corporeal feminism, postcolonial feminism, and eco-spiritual feminism, alongside the Kamakhya Temple's menstruating goddess and Sinu Joseph's Rtu Vidya. It finds not a single feminist menstrual poetics but a differentiated menstrual literary cartography, in which caste, genre, language, and platform generate distinct grammars of the bleeding body, and sacred traditions function as contested rather than redemptive resources.

KEYWORD

Corporeal feminism; gynocriticism; Kamakhya temple; menstruation in literature; South Asian feminism

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1. Introduction

Menstruation, though a routine biological process experienced by nearly half the global population, remains enveloped in stigma, silence, and socio-cultural regulation across South Asia. Framed by patriarchal, caste, and religious ideologies of ritual purity, the menstruating body is construed as defiling, and that construction materialises in exclusion from temples and kitchens, in seclusion and school absenteeism, and in restricted access to accurate menstrual education. Public-health campaigns and menstrual-hygiene initiatives have improved access to products and infrastructure, yet their depoliticised, technocratic vocabularies treat menstruation chiefly as a hygiene deficit, leaving intact

the cultural constructions that render it taboo in the first place (Bobel, 2019).

South Asian traditions nonetheless preserve counter-currents in which menstrual blood carries sacred rather than polluting valence. The Kamakhya Temple in Assam, where the menstruating Goddess is venerated during the annual Ambubachi Mela, is the most frequently cited instance, and Sinu Joseph's *Rtu Vidya* (2020) attempts to recover such epistemologies, reframing the cycle as a rhythmic, intelligent process embedded in ecological and cosmological order rather than as pathology. Whether these traditions constitute genuine alternatives to menstrual stigma, or inversions that leave the purity-pollution binary structurally intact, is itself a critical question this paper pursues rather than assumes.

Two bodies of discourse have thus developed largely in parallel: an activist and public-health literature concerned with material access, and a religious-cultural discourse concerned with sacred meaning. Literary representation falls between them. Despite the consolidation of critical menstruation studies as an interdisciplinary field (Bobel et al., 2020), scholarship rarely subjects South Asian women's literary treatments of menstruation to sustained close reading, and rarer still reads such treatments in direct conversation with indigenous sacred epistemologies. Menstruation is consequently well documented as a health and rights concern, and increasingly as a cultural one, but remains under-theorised as a literary trope possessing its own formal and figurative resources.

This paper addresses that gap through close readings of six South Asian women writers whose work spans seven decades, five languages and translation contexts, and radically different publication economies, from mid-century Urdu fiction to globally circulated Instagram poetry. Its argument is twofold. First, literature performs cultural work that biomedical and developmental discourse cannot, because it is not obliged to produce a single, policy-actionable definition of what menstruation is; it can hold the bleeding body simultaneously as wound, weapon, testimony, and sacrament. Second, these writers do not compose one feminist menstrual tradition. Caste, genre, language, and media platform fracture their poetics into distinguishable grammars, which this paper maps as a menstrual literary cartography rather than a linear progression from repression to liberation.

The stakes are both interpretive and political. To read menstruation as literature is to insist that the meanings attached to the bleeding body are made, contested, and remade in language, and therefore that they can be rewritten. Yet to read it comparatively is also to resist the temptation of a redemptive narrative in which stigma gives way to celebration, since the writers examined here show menstrual shame persisting, mutating, and reappearing inside the very platforms and traditions that promise release from it. The problem this paper addresses is therefore not the absence of menstrual representation in South Asian women's writing, which is considerable, but the absence of a critical framework capable of reading that representation as literature: attentive to figure, form, silence, and address rather than to theme alone, and capable of registering how differently positioned writers make the same bodily process signify incompatible things.

This study **seeks** to:

1. Analyse how menstruation is represented in contemporary South Asian women's literature, and how the bleeding body becomes a site of resistance and reimagining;
2. Examine how gynocriticism, corporeal feminism, postcolonial feminism, and cultural or eco-spiritual feminism intersect with indigenous spiritual traditions in reinterpreting menstrual taboos;
3. Assess the role of poetry, prose, and digital media in producing a counter-discourse to menstrual silence; and
4. Establish, through comparative close reading, how caste, genre, region, and media platform differentiate menstrual literary resistance.

The significance of the study lies in bridging feminist literary criticism with cultural and ecological traditions that sacralise menstruation, while subjecting both to intersectional scrutiny. It validates creative expression as an epistemological tool that resists Western universalism and regressive traditionalism alike, and extends critical menstruation studies (Bobel et al., 2020) into sustained literary close reading.

2. Literature Review

Four bodies of scholarship converge on this study's problem, and their tensions, rather than their consensus, define the space it occupies.

The first is critical menstruation studies. Bobel's *The Managed Body* (2019) argues that global-health framings depoliticise menstruation by privileging hygiene and access over autonomy and embodiment, a critique widely accepted but faulted for limited engagement with the affective and spiritual dimensions of menstruation outside the West. Subsequent Indian scholarship reworks rather than resolves the biomedical-activist binary Bobel identifies: Mitra and Karunakaran (2024) document women actively contesting the social control of the menstruating body rather than merely enduring it, while Rao et al. (2025) trace the persistence of stigma alongside emergent menstrual-equity discourse. The *Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies* (Bobel et al., 2020), spanning seventy-two chapters and more than thirty countries, marks the field's consolidation; yet Sukumar's (2020) first-person narrative within that same volume demonstrates that caste is underrepresented as a structuring axis of menstrual experience unless explicitly foregrounded.

The second is feminist literary and corporeal theory. Showalter's (1979, 1981) gynocriticism recovers a female literary tradition centring women as subjects and creators, but has been criticised for presuming a universal female experience and privileging white Western writing. Cixous (1976) and Irigaray (1985) theorise writing from the body as liberatory and linguistically subversive, and Grosz (1994) extends the corporeal turn by treating the female body itself, not only writing about it, as a site of knowledge production, though Irigaray's metaphysics has drawn critique for abstraction and essentialism. Recent South Asian and comparative criticism carries this apparatus into new material:

Kirtikar (2023) reads embodied, fragmented narrative form in Partition-era women's fiction as itself a feminist historiographic strategy, while work reassessing canonical feminist modernism (Bhargava & Devi, 2025) and the identity-forming function of narrative (Devi & Bansal, 2025) signals a turn toward reading such frameworks alongside vernacular and digital storytelling rather than as rival traditions.

The third is postcolonial and eco-spiritual feminism. Mohanty (1984, 2003) dismantles the homogenising trope of the Third World woman and insists on localised, intersectional analysis; Narayan (1997) cautions against the package picture of culture that renders non-Western traditions either wholly oppressive or wholly liberatory. Cultural and eco-spiritual approaches address the resulting difficulty of reconciling political resistance with cultural reclamation: Narayanan (2006) situates gendered embodiment within Hindu ecological thought, and Joseph (2020) reinterprets menstrual taboo as metaphysical guidance oriented to energetic harmony. Literary-folkloric scholarship on Kamakhya partially corroborates this reading, tracing how the Ambubachi Mela converts ritual pollution into cosmological potency (Das, 2026), while Kakati (2024) reads menstrual sanctity and menstrual taboo as co-constitutive expressions of a single logic of bodily control. Both sacralisation and prohibition, that is, require the same intersectional scrutiny postcolonial feminism directs at colonial and biomedical discourse.

The fourth, largely absent from earlier menstrual literary criticism, concerns digital and mediated body politics. Sen (2025) shows that Indian advertising continues to reproduce stigma through concealment and euphemism even as digital feminist discourse promotes disclosure; Gill and Orgad (2018) name the double bind whereby the female body is hyper-visible as an object of consumption yet invisible as a subject of its own biological narration. Đurić and Izgarjan (2022) complicate celebratory readings of Instapoetry by showing how Kaur's menstrual verse is absorbed into a neoliberal, self-help-inflected literary economy, while Pandey and Chaudhuri (2026) find Indian feminist Instagram accounts constructing alternative feminist grammars rooted in local sociocultural realities rather than importing Western digital feminism wholesale. Ludington's (2025) cross-national narrative inquiry meanwhile establishes first-person, non-clinical storytelling as a recurrent international strategy for reclaiming interpretive authority over the menstruating body.

Read together, these literatures offer four distinct ways of construing menstruation, as text, as body, as resistance, and as ritual, but they rarely address one another. Critical menstruation studies supply the political critique yet seldom reads literary form; feminist corporeal theory supplies the reading practice yet was developed on a largely Western archive; postcolonial and eco-spiritual feminism supply the cultural specificity yet divide over whether ritual is oppression or resource; and platform scholarship supplies the contemporary media logic yet treats poetry chiefly as data. What follows from this configuration is a double omission. Sustained close reading of South Asian menstrual writing is scarce, and where menstruation is read in literature it is generally read as theme, catalogued across texts, rather than as a figure whose meaning is produced by genre, address, silence, and circulation. This study works at that intersection, and treats the unresolved tension between secular

resistance and sacred reclamation not as an obstacle to be settled in advance but as the analytic problem South Asian women's literature is uniquely positioned to stage.

2.1 Historical Overview

Menstrual taboo in South Asia has been shaped by the interaction of religious codification, caste hierarchy, and colonial modernity. Ayurvedic and Tantric traditions once held complex and at times reverent views of menstruation, associating it with cyclical power and renewal and framing menarche as a rite of passage into socially and spiritually recognised womanhood, a pattern documented widely in the literature on female puberty rites (Hossfeld, 2020). Temples such as Kamakhya, where the menstruating Goddess is worshipped, preserve this valence. Over centuries, however, dominant patriarchal codification redefined menstruation as ritual impurity, with texts such as the *Manu Smriti* prescribing exclusion from temples, kitchens, and communal life (Doniger & Smith, 1991), prescriptions that functioned as instruments of gendered and caste-based control rather than of piety alone.

Colonialism recast rather than removed this stigma. Victorian moralism reinforced menstrual shame while medicalising the female body, and post-independence public-health campaigns, though expanding access and awareness, extended the same biomedical framing. Only in recent decades, with feminist movements, Dalit literature, ecofeminism (Shiva & Mies, 1993), and digital activism, documented within the longer history of the Indian women's movement (Kumar, 2004), has menstruation been rearticulated as a cultural and political question. Literature has been central to that rearticulation, enabling writers to contest inherited narratives and imagine new grammars of the bleeding body.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study employs close reading as its primary method, grounded in feminist literary criticism and supplemented by comparative textual analysis.

3.1 Text Selection

Kamala Das, Ismat Chughtai, Bama, Meena Kandasamy, H. Lavanya, and Rupī Kaur were purposively selected on three criteria: explicit or metaphorically dense engagement with menstruation, blood, or the bleeding body; representativeness of distinct historical moments, linguistic traditions, and social locations, spanning confessional poetry and memoir (Das), mid-twentieth-century Urdu fiction (Chughtai), Dalit Christian testimonio (Bama), English-language protest poetry (Kandasamy), vernacular Tamil rural poetry (Lavanya), and digital Instapoetry (Kaur); and sufficient primary or translated material to permit close reading. This maximum-variation strategy privileges breadth of genre, region, caste position, and period over exhaustiveness, and is designed to surface heterogeneity

rather than a single essentialised trajectory.

3.2 Analytical Framework

Each text is read against four overlapping lenses: gynocriticism (Showalter, 1979, 1981), attentive to the emergence of a distinct female literary tradition; corporeal feminism and *écriture féminine* (Cixous, 1976; Irigaray, 1985; Grosz, 1994), which treat the body as a site of textual and political inscription; postcolonial feminism (Mohanty, 1984, 2003; Narayan, 1997), which situates embodiment within histories of colonialism, caste, and nationalism; and cultural and eco-spiritual feminism (Narayanan, 2006; Joseph, 2020), which reads menstrual ritual through non-Western cosmologies rather than a purely secular frame.

Close reading proceeds in three interpretive steps for each passage: identifying the literal and figurative registers in which menstruation, blood, or the body are invoked; situating the quotation within its immediate narrative or lyric context; and reading it through the lens most productive for that text, making explicit how its language performs, resists, or complicates the theoretical claim at issue. Each quotation is thus treated as an object of interpretation rather than as illustration appended to description.

3.3 Comparative Procedure

Following the individual readings, a comparative discussion reads the six authors against one another along five axes, agency, spirituality, resistance mode, caste salience, and embodiment, in order to surface convergences and divergences that sequential author-by-author analysis obscures.

3.4 Limitations

Four limitations warrant acknowledgement. The study relies substantially on English translations (Chughtai, Bama, Lavanya), which mediate tone and cultural specificity; where a translator's choices are consequential, this is flagged. The purposive sample excludes other significant voices, notably Adivasi, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, and Nepali writers, and trans and non-binary menstruators, whose absence indicates the study's bounded scope rather than their marginality. Close reading is interpretive rather than statistically generalisable, and its claims are offered as critically defensible rather than exclusive. Finally, engagement with Rtu Vidya and the Kamakhya tradition draws on secondary, folkloric, and popular sources rather than exclusively classical Sanskritic ones.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Kamakhya and Rtu Vidya: Sacralising the Bleeding Body

The Kamakhya Temple offers the most cited South Asian counter-narrative to menstrual taboo. During the Ambubachi Mela the temple closes for three days to honour the Goddess's menstruation,

sacralising bleeding as fertility, regeneration, and divine feminine power (Ramaswamy, 2011). Where other shrines exclude menstruating women, Kamakhya converts impurity into potency, and for feminist writers the bleeding goddess becomes a mythic archetype of transformation rather than shame.

Recent scholarship complicates any straightforwardly redemptive reading. Kakati (2024) reads the Happy to Bleed framing of Kamakhya against the exclusionary Sabarimala tradition to argue that menstrual sanctity and menstrual taboo are co-constitutive expressions of a single patriarchal logic of bodily control, one that inverts rather than dismantles the purity-pollution binary. Das (2026) traces the myth's afterlife in Assamese literary production, where the goddess's dismembered, bleeding body furnishes a vocabulary of regenerative rather than merely tolerated embodiment. Kamakhya thus functions as a partial and unevenly available symbolic resource that writers draw on selectively and often critically.

Joseph's *Rtu Vidya* (2020) develops a culturally rooted reinterpretation through Ayurveda and Tantra, rejecting both biomedical pathologisation and what she reads as secular feminist dismissal of ritual. Menstruation appears as energetic release, *apāna vāyu*, requiring rest to restore *prakriti*, and as a periodic withdrawal of *shakti* that is renewal rather than exclusion. Her claim that "our ancestors didn't silence menstruation; they sanctified it" recasts seclusion as accommodation of cyclical need, and her assertion that "a menstruating woman is in a heightened state of intuition" reframes withdrawal as the protection of an intensified epistemic state (Joseph, 2020).

The reclamation is nonetheless vulnerable to the charge of romanticisation. The customs Joseph celebrates have been enforced unequally, with far greater rigidity for Dalit and rural women, and with little regard for consent, a hierarchy her framework tends to smooth over (Rege, 2006; Mohanty, 2003). Read alongside Narayan's (1997) warning against the package picture of culture, *Rtu Vidya* is best treated neither as authentic corrective nor as false consciousness, but as a discourse whose internal

What the literary texts inherit from this tradition, then, is not a doctrine but a vocabulary: the possibility of describing menstrual blood in a register of potency, and the corresponding risk that potency and prohibition prove to be the same sentence spoken in different keys. Crucially, this sacred register is not the lived reality of most South Asian menstruators, who encounter pain, prohibition, and silence rather than veneration. Feminist literary responses therefore emerge less as celebrations of menstrual divinity than as confrontations with menstrual marginalisation, answering Cixous's (1976) injunction that "woman must write her body," the body "that has been forbidden her."

4.2 Kamala Das: Confession and Corporeality

Das reclaims the female body through confession, desire, and corporeal imagery, making the body a source of self-definition rather than an object of shame. In *My Story* she narrates bodily pain, desire, and trauma without euphemism: "I have bled and bled, and when I see a girl... I think of the many ways in which a woman bleeds" (Das, 1976). Read through Grosz's (1994) claim that the female body actively produces knowledge rather than passively receiving cultural inscription, the repetition of "bled

and bled" performs the body's own historicity. Bleeding here is not a containable event but an accumulating archive of gendered suffering, and the confessional mode makes that archive legible as testimony rather than as symptom.

The corporeal claim becomes explicit in "The Looking Glass," where Das instructs the woman to give her lover "the musk of sweat between the breasts, / the warm shock of menstrual blood, / and all your endless female hungers" (Das, 1967). Naming menstrual blood within an erotic catalogue is doubly transgressive: it refuses the euphemism that governs Indian literary treatments of the subject, and it declines to keep menstruation and desire in separate discursive compartments. "Warm shock" carries both sensuality and violence, registering menstruation as disruptive force rather than passive occurrence. This is the gesture Irigaray (1985) identifies as *parler-femme*: language that refuses to sublimate the body into metaphor and insists instead on its literal, fluid, boundary-transgressing materiality.

The disruption operates on two levels at once, unsettling the poem's own erotic register and the cultural silence that would keep menstrual blood unnamed. Das's lyric voice thus enacts what Cixous (1976) demands, that woman "write herself," while locating that writing in a specifically Indian domestic and marital economy where the confessional first person was itself scandalous. Menstruation becomes an emblem of agency, but agency figured through erotic self-authorship rather than through myth or politics, which is precisely what distinguishes her poetics from the writers who follow. Notably, the poem's grammar is imperative and second-person, "gift him," so that even this act of naming is routed through a transaction with a male addressee; Das secures visibility for menstrual blood without yet securing a language in which the bleeding body speaks for itself rather than offers itself. That unresolved tension, between corporeal candour and residual heterosexual address, is the limit her successors press against.

4.3 Ismat Chughtai: Unspoken Bodies

In Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1942), menstruation is conspicuously absent, yet the story pulses with bodily presence. The confined world of Begum Jan, her unfulfilled marriage and her same-sex intimacy narrated obliquely through a child's uncomprehending gaze, replaces sanitised depiction with subtextual embodiment: heat, skin, and sensation beneath the quilt. As Kumar (1994) observes, Chughtai "wrote women's bodies into the centre of Urdu fiction" through metaphor, implication, and narrative voice. The absence of menstrual reference is not evasion but mimesis of a cultural prohibition the narrative simultaneously exposes.

Her nonfiction makes the prohibition explicit. In "My Friend, My Enemy" she writes: "The moment a woman speaks of her body, people are scandalised. They want women to remain under a veil, not just in dress, but in thought, in experience, in language" (Chughtai, 1983). The passage names what Mohanty (2003) theorises as the discursive colonisation of women's experience: the demand that corporeal knowledge be mediated through euphemism operates, in Chughtai's satire, as a domestic

analogue of the epistemic silencing postcolonial feminism identifies at the level of nation and empire. Veiling is relocated from cloth to language, which is where literature can contest it.

Defending Lihaaf at her obscenity trial, Chughtai insisted: "I write what I see. I don't write for men, nor to titillate them. I write for myself and my women." The refusal is not merely a plea for artistic licence but a gynocritical claim in Showalter's (1979) sense, asserting narrative authority over embodied experience that patriarchal literary gatekeeping had reserved for male writers. Read alongside Kirtikar's (2023) account of fragmented, embodied form as feminist historiography, Chughtai's silences emerge as deliberate formal strategy: absence becomes a rhetorical instrument for representing what a culture forbids women to name. Where Das names menstrual blood and thereby breaks a prohibition, Chughtai reproduces the prohibition formally and thereby exposes its shape, and the two strategies are best read as complementary rather than as successive stages of feminist candour.

4.4 Bama: Caste, Gender, and Menstrual Stigma

Karukku (1992) disrupts Hindu and Christian patriarchal frameworks alike by narrating menstruation from a Dalit Christian woman's position, where stigma is not merely gendered but constituted through caste. Bama recounts prohibitions framed as custom yet functioning as social control: "When a woman has her period, she is seen as impure and must not enter the church. We had to wash ourselves again and again before we could even go near the altar" (Bama, 2000). Impurity is here doubled, the menstruating body already marked as polluting within a caste order that marks it as untouchable, so that ritual ablution becomes an infinitely repeatable and never sufficient purification.

The formal register matters as much as the content. Rege (2006) argues that Dalit women's testimonies "speak of how the body is both marked and policed through caste and gender," and the plural first person of Bama's sentence, "we had to wash ourselves," converts individual humiliation into collective record. Sukumar's (2020) later account of caste-based menstrual exclusion confirms that the specific practice Bama describes persists decades after Karukku, evidencing structural rather than historically contained violence. Read through corporeal feminism, Bama's insistence on narrating her own body enacts the reclamation Grosz (1994) theorises: a body marked impure by caste ideology is reinscribed through testimony as a body that speaks rather than one spoken about.

Karukku does not, however, present menstruation solely as injury. By narrating in the first person and publishing in Tamil from within a Dalit Christian community, Bama transforms the defiled body into a site of what Mohanty (2003) calls feminist praxis, where personal narrative contests epistemic hierarchy. Her menstruating body becomes an embodied archive of both oppression and refusal, affirming the claim of cultural ecofeminists (Shiva & Mies, 1993) that the embodied knowledge of marginalised women must be central, not supplementary, to any critique of gender and power. The distinction from the preceding writers is decisive. For Das and Chughtai, menstruation is withheld or revealed within a broadly shared field of patriarchal prohibition; for Bama, prohibition is administered differentially, by a church that codes some bodies as more polluting than others, so that

no appeal to a common female embodiment can account for what her text records.

4.5 Meena Kandasamy and H. Lavanya: Blood as Protest

4.5.1 Kandasamy: *Kali's Fury and Menstrual Power*

In *Ms. Militancy* (2010), Kandasamy recasts women's bodies as sites of sacred and revolutionary energy, subverting Kali to fuse bodily function with divine wrath. "I wield my red," she writes, "no, not the vermilion of meek wives, / but the blood of battle, of birth, and betrayal" (Kandasamy, 2010). The line's rhetorical work is dissociative: it severs red from the vermilion sindoor of marital submission and reattaches it to a triad of violence, generation, and treachery within which menstrual blood is included without being named. Naming is withheld precisely because the poem claims blood as a general political substance rather than a gynaecological particular.

"Evil Spirits" makes the mythic register explicit: "Blood trickled down her thighs, but no one saw Kali, / only a curse they couldn't contain" (Kandasamy, 2010). Menstruation is figured as divine chaos, unseen as goddess yet feared as curse, an inversion in which patriarchal terror of the bleeding body is repurposed as the source of its power. This militant reclamation corresponds to what Mitra and Karunakaran (2024) identify as an emergent register of active resistance rather than passive endurance in contemporary Indian menstrual discourse: where earlier writers confessed or fell silent, Kandasamy claims menstruation as weaponised agency.

4.5.2 Lavanya: *Rural Pain and Embodied Testimony*

Lavanya's Tamil verse, less translated and less circulated, records menstruation as entangled with poverty, sanitation deficits, and ostracism. In Krishnaswamy's (2018) translation she writes of a girl who "folds a torn sari into four, / to soak the monthly wound, / praying the red does not betray her in the classroom." The image is precise in its economy: the torn sari indexes material deprivation, "monthly wound" refuses both sacralisation and clinical neutrality, and betrayal locates shame not in the body but in the possibility of being seen. Rao et al. (2025) corroborate this disjunction empirically, finding deprivation and stigma mutually reinforcing even as menstrual-equity discourse gains urban visibility.

Lavanya neither romanticises blood nor mythologises it; she laments its neglect, and in lamenting performs the narrative witness Bobel (2019) identifies with menstrual activism. Read together, the two poets establish a radical feminist vernacular in which menstruation signifies both defiance and survival: Kandasamy mythologises and weaponises blood, Lavanya grounds it in the classroom and the torn sari. Their divergence within a shared Tamil literary field indicates how sharply class and rurality inflect what the bleeding body can be made to mean. It is also a divergence of address: Kandasamy writes in English to a cosmopolitan readership that can receive Kali as political metaphor, whereas Lavanya writes in Tamil about a classroom in which blood is not metaphor but

exposure, and reaches an anglophone readership only through the mediating labour of translation.

4.6 Rupi Kaur: Instagram as Menstrual Archive

Kaur's removed Instagram photograph of menstrual blood staining her clothing and bedsheet marks a watershed in the public visualisation of menstruation. The censorship, and the outcry that reversed it, exposed a platform logic that Gill and Orgad (2018) describe as the double bind of the sexualisation of culture: the female body is rendered hyper-visible as an object of consumption yet invisible as a subject of its own biological narration, so that menstrual blood becomes unspeakable precisely where the eroticised body is permitted. Her verse names this asymmetry directly, refusing to "apologise for not feeding the ego and pride of a misogynist society that will have me whisper / my body functions / but draws pornography out of your hips" (Kaur, 2015).

The Milk and Honey lines "apparently it is ungraceful of me to mention my period in public / cause the actual biology of my body is too real" locate the offence not in blood but in referentiality: what transgresses is the insistence that the body is actual rather than aestheticised (Kaur, 2015). Kaur's flat diction and lower-case minimalism perform this claim formally, declining lyric elevation in favour of statement, and her chosen medium extends Showalter's (1981) gynocritical project of women reclaiming voice into a distributive register, an accessible digital archive rather than a literary canon. She has described the intent explicitly, choosing menstruation "to try and demystify the stigmas around it" (Dazed Digital, 2015).

This reading nonetheless requires qualification. Đurić and Izgarjan (2022) argue that Kaur's Instapoetry is also a successful commercial product whose utilitarian value lies partly in its compatibility with a neoliberal self-help economy that packages feminist disclosure as aphoristic, consumable content. Her menstrual poetics is therefore neither purely subversive nor merely commodified but occupies an ambivalent space in which reclamation and market logic are co-produced. Sen (2025) supports this empirically: Indian advertising continues to rely on concealment even as digital discourse promotes disclosure, so Kaur's work operates in tension with, rather than triumph over, its media ecology. Pandey and Chaudhuri (2026) further situate her as one register within Indian digital feminism rather than its definitive statement, since Instagram-based feminist accounts construct "alternative feminist grammars rooted in local sociocultural realities" rather than replicating her individualised confessional mode.

Kaur's poetics thus functions simultaneously as therapy and as theory, answering Cixous's (1976) call to write the body in a form legible to digitally native audiences, and confirming Ludington's (2025) finding that first-person, non-clinical narrative operates internationally as a means of reclaiming interpretive authority over menstruation. Her closing gesture, in which blood is at once ordinary and sacred, echoes the veneration of Kamakhya while remaining, unlike it, wholly available for circulation and purchase. The bleeding body here is not a wound hidden but a wound that speaks, and speaks within a market. This ambivalence is not a flaw to be resolved but the condition of

contemporary menstrual visibility: the same infrastructure that made a photograph of menstrual blood globally legible also determined, algorithmically and commercially, the terms on which it could be seen.

4.7 Comparative Discussion: Divergent Grammars of the Bleeding Body

Read sequentially, these six authors appear to describe a single cumulative movement from silence to declaration. Read comparatively, their divergences prove as theoretically significant as their convergences. Table 1 summarises the comparison across five axes.

Three patterns emerge. First, spirituality functions asymmetrically. It is central to Kandasamy's mythic register and to the Kamakhya and Rtu Vidya framework, largely absent from Chughtai's and Bama's secular testimonial modes, and instrumentalised as New Age self-help idiom in Kaur (Duric & Izgarjan, 2022). Sacralisation is thus not a single coherent counter- discourse but a resource invoked,

Table 1 *Comparative Grammars of Menstrual Representation*

Author	Agency	Spirituality	Resistance Mode	Caste Salience	Embodiment
Kamala Das	Erotic and confessional self-authorship	Largely absent; the body is sacred through desire, not religion	Subtextual, confessional	Not foregrounded	Body as site of erotic and emotional truth
Ismat Chughtai	Narrative authorship reclaimed from censorship	Absent; explicitly secular and satirical	Subtextual; omission as strategy	Not foregrounded	Body present through absence and implication
Bama	Testimonial witness	Explicitly critiqued (church purity codes)	Testimonial, first-person witness	Central and structuring	Body as caste-marked and policed
Meena Kandasamy	Mythic-militant reclamation	Central (Kali, Shakti)	Weaponised, declarative	Present but secondary to gender	Body as divine and dangerous
H. Lavanya	Constrained by material poverty	Largely absent; grounded, material register	Elegiac witness	Present via rural and class marginality	Body as materially deprived
Rupi Kaur	Commercially mediated self-disclosure	Instrumentalised (New Age self-help register)	Declarative, platform-based	Not foregrounded	Body as digitally circulated image and text

refused, or repurposed according to genre, audience, and historical moment.

Second, caste is the clearest fault line, separating writers who can treat menstruation as a generalisable feminine experience (Das, Kandasamy, Kaur) from Bama, for whom menstrual stigma is inseparable from, and indeed constituted by, untouchability. This asymmetry corroborates the argument of Rege (2006) and Sukumar (2020) that mainstream feminist and literary treatments risk universalising an experience stratified by caste privilege, and it is the principal reason this study resists treating its authors as interchangeable instances of one feminist menstrual poetics.

Third, the register of resistance shifts from interiorised and subtextual (Chughtai, Das) to testimonial (Bama), mythic-militant (Kandasamy), material-elegiac (Lavanya), and declarative-digital (Kaur), mapping loosely but imperfectly onto chronology. This is best understood not as progress from repression to liberation but as an expansion of available grammars, an expansion literature enables precisely because, unlike biomedical or developmental discourse, it need not produce a single policy-actionable claim about what menstruation is.

4.8 Theoretical Implications

Three implications follow. For gynocriticism, the female literary tradition Showalter (1979, 1981) sought to recover appears less a unified voice than a stratified field in which caste, region, language, and platform produce genuinely distinct menstrual poetics; a method attentive only to gender risks reproducing the universalism Rege (2006) and Sukumar (2020) caution against.

For postcolonial feminism, indigenous sacred traditions such as Kamakhya and Rtu Vidya cannot be read simply as authentic alternatives to biomedical or secular feminist frameworks. Following Narayan's (1997) critique of the package picture of culture, they require the same intersectional scrutiny, attentive to caste, class, and gender hierarchy, that postcolonial feminism directs at colonial discourse.

For critical menstruation studies (Bobel et al., 2020) and what this paper terms menstrual humanities, the contribution is methodological. Close literary reading, as distinct from thematic cataloguing, shows menstrual meaning being constructed at the level of form, image, and genre rather than content alone, an analytic level public-health and social-science scholarship is not designed to provide. Literature is therefore not one more site where stigma is documented, but a distinct epistemic practice through which menstrual meaning is made and remade.

Conclusion

This study finds that menstruation in South Asian women's writing is neither a stable biological referent nor a single feminist symbol, but a contested figure whose meanings are produced differently across caste, genre, language, and medium. Its principal finding is that the apparent arc from silence to declaration is better described as an expansion of grammars: subtextual and confessional embodiment

(Chughtai, Das), caste-marked testimony (Bama), mythic-militant reclamation (Kandasamy), material elegy (Lavanya), and commercially mediated digital declaration (Kaur) coexist as distinct literary strategies rather than succeeding one another as stages of progress.

The originality of the study lies in three interlocking moves not previously combined: it subjects South Asian women's menstrual writing to sustained close reading rather than thematic survey; it reads that writing in direct comparative dialogue with indigenous sacred traditions, namely Kamakhya and Rtu Vidya, treated critically rather than romantically; and it demonstrates that caste, genre, and platform fracture any universalised account of menstrual literary resistance. Its scholarly contribution is correspondingly twofold, offering the first sustained comparative reading of these six authors through a shared menstrual lens, and modelling a close-reading method extensible to other bodily taboos and regional literatures.

Taken together, these findings suggest that literature is not an illustrative supplement to menstrual scholarship but one of its primary sites, since it is in figure, address, and form that the bleeding body acquires the meanings that policy and ritual then contest. The implications reach beyond literary criticism. If menstrual meaning is made in form and figure, then interventions pitched solely at hygiene and access will continue to leave the structures of stigma untouched, while sacralising traditions, however appealing as counter-narratives, may reinstate control in a different idiom. Three directions for further work follow: comparable close readings of Adivasi, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi, Nepali, and trans and non-binary menstrual writing; research at the intersection of menstrual humanities and platform studies, examining how algorithmic moderation determines which menstrual expression becomes visible at all; and critical study of indigenous menstrual epistemologies as historically situated discourses to be read, like literature itself, for their own hierarchies and exclusions.

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Declaration

This manuscript is original work and has not been submitted or published elsewhere in full or in part. The research, analysis, and arguments presented in this article are the author's own. AI tools, if used,

were solely for language refinement, grammatical clarity, and formatting assistance. No AI tool was used for generating the core ideas, analysis, interpretations, or findings of the research.

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