



GRAPHIC RESISTANCE AND FEMINIST COUNTER-NARRATIVES: CHALLENGING MENSTRUAL STIGMA THROUGH A DRIP. A DROP. A DELUGE: A PERIOD TRAGICOMEDY

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ABSTRACT

Menstruation has often been a neglected discourse in social settings, considering the natural physiological process of a relatively healthy female body as impure. This makes the complex, multilayered psychosocial experiences of women across their reproductive life-course invisible and unspeakable. Moreover, menstruation in Asian society is subject to cultural stigma and restrictive social practices. Within the growing field of Graphic Medicine, Menstruation has significant representation through the unique combination of verbo-visual affordances. *A Drip. A Drop. A Deluge: A Period Tragicomedy* by Andeasand discusses the common yet distinctive experiences of six women from Menstruation to Menopause. The comic renders the unique, complex, and often distressing realities of physiological and psychological change through stark visuals. The repeated visual imagery of menstrual blood and half-dressed bodies destabilizes the historical association of menstruation with impurity, reframing it as a site of empowerment, confidence and commonality. The graphic narrative renders the menstruating female body vulnerable and transitional through embodied representations of pain and anxiety. The repeated visual metaphors of blood function as an act of graphic resistance, transforming menstruation from a silenced biological process into a visible and shared experiential reality. This research paper analyses the comic through the visual metaphors of the psycho-social experiences and argues that the narrative functions as a feminist counter-discourse. The paper concludes that challenging menstrual stigma through humour and graphic resistance reinforces agency and bodily autonomy.

KEYWORDS : Menstruation, Stigma, Feminist Narrative, Visual Metaphor, Resistance

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation, often a socially restrictive discourse, finds fewer representations in popular culture and literature. The perpetuating misconceptions, shame and silence intensifies the psychological distress in women, especially in south Asian context. With the onset of Menarche, a female body becomes a site of voyeurism, leading to social ostracization. These ambivalent cultural discourses around menstruation, according to Lee and Sasser-Coen, show how "social interpretations of women's bleeding have structured and restricted women's lives" (70). Andeasand depicts the social, familial and work place exclusion of girls and women during menstruation as its interpretation often "involve a discourse of pollution and the requirement of a separation or seclusion of individual women from the daily activities" (70).

Iris Marion Young reflects on Beauvoir's description of the onset of menstruation as a "crisis" for girls, inducing feelings of fear, disgust, shame and ambivalence (100). In the first part of *A Drip. A Drop. A Deluge*, Ruby, a teenage girl is instructed by her mom to announce the onset of her period to her relatives through a phone call. Ruby seems to be confused, still agreeing to her mom's instruction with a skeptical 'OKAY' that underscores the excessive attention given to a woman's natural bodily process often rendered special attention. The comic page visualises the near impossibility of keeping menstruation private through larger-than-life, overflowing speech balloons where Ruby's mother calls her out loudly to wash her blood stained underwear. Following Groensteen's description of speech and thought balloons that overflow panel boundaries in his *The System of Comics* (78), the enlarged speech balloons here acquires unusual visual dominance and underscores the intrusion of familial and social authority into Ruby's private experience.

Another page represents the conflicting ways in which menstrual hygiene practices both educate and at times alienate women. It presents menstrual education as a complex confluence of care and regulation. While the adult's instructions provide Ruby with practical knowledge regarding menstrual hygiene and pad disposal, the elaborate process of wrapping the used pad also communicates broader cultural

expectations of concealment. Ruby's observation that the pad "is still going into the bin anyway" (5) subtly questions the necessity of such practices, revealing how menstrual management is intertwined with the social disciplining and marginalization of menstruation.

Ruby experiences vaginal irritation caused by plastic pads, leading to the avoidance of physical education classes in school. This dramatizes how commercial menstrual products, though marketed as "modern" and "hygienic," often compromise comfort and sustainability. Research on reusable sanitary pads in Uganda found that while provision reduced fears of leakage and absenteeism, some girls reported burning sensations and irritation (Hennegan et al. 78). Broader reviews of menstrual hygiene materials note that mass market disposable pads contain high levels of plastic polymers, contributing to rashes, itching, and long term non-biodegradable environmental waste (Narawade et al. 46). These findings underscore that commercialization has prioritized performance and affordability over ecological sustainability and embodied comfort, reinforcing the comic's visual critique of redness in thighs, the persistent irritation and exclusion from everyday activities. The comic page visualises the irritation caused by "thick and waterproof pads" which feels like sandpaper on her vagina (Andeasand 6). Another panel stresses how Ruby is left with no choice but to "just stretch" during physical education classes in school making her feel "doomed for life" (6). The enclosed panel borders suggest a sense of confinement and limited personal choices available to Ruby during menstruation. In contrast, the serendipitous discovery of comfortable, soft pads at her Aunt's house is inferred as a liberating experience, visually marked by the absence of enclosing panel borders.

Dunlop expands McCloud's concept of "bleeds", images that extend beyond panel borders; it argues that panel shapes actively manipulate reader perception and emotional engagement. She notes that removing borders "propels the moment into a timeless space," allowing readers to feel rather than merely perceive the narrative (9). In her analysis of *Just So Happens* by Fumio Obata, Dunlop demonstrates how the combination of confined and unconfined panels immerses the

reader, transforming McCloud's theory of timelessness into an affective experience of inclusion and empathy. The borderless final image in *A Drip. A Drop. A Deluge* marks the transition from menstrual restrictions induced by isolating moments of irritation and social exclusion to resistance and liberation foregrounding embodied relief and retrieving mobility. This can be inferred as a liberating encounter not just for Ruby, but a shared extricating experience for many girls and women facing discomfort with substandard menstrual hygiene products.

The menstrual denigration persists even at home through practices of isolating menstruating women, viewing the menstruating body and blood as contaminated and perpetuating superstitious religious and cultural beliefs. While Ruby visits her grandmother's home during periods, she is advised to place a newspaper underneath any surface she sits on to avoid staining, including on the sofa, bedsheet and the dining chair. A constant fear is induced in Ruby by family and society that creates unusual anxiousness and ingrained fear during menstruation that lingers in her mind. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir states that menstruation affects many women to constantly "think of making her changes, must keep watch of her underwear, her sheets, must solve a thousand little practical and repugnant problems" (315).

Similarly, Ruby's constant discomfort and vigilance over leakage visually enact Beauvoir's idea of menstruation as a repetitive, exhausting negotiation between body and social expectation. Ruby's body is considered potentially contaminating and she is expected to protect furniture, beds and public surfaces from menstrual blood. The final image in the page represents Ruby in her dream where her body is crushed in a wrapped newspaper, keeping her alert even during sleep (Andeasand 7). Therefore the recurring newspaper functions as a material technology of menstrual containment. In the final dream sequence, the newspaper invades Ruby's subconscious, symbolising the internalisation of menstrual shame and the anxiety of leakage. By making this otherwise invisible psychological burden visible, the comic resists the normalisation of menstrual stigma and exposes its affective consequences in young girls.

A Drip. A Drop. A Deluge moves beyond a memoir of lived experiences of menstruation; it effectively educates women by visually guiding through its informative representations on choosing the right menstrual cup (Andeasand 18), and discusses historical menstrual management methods with humour and visually navigates the transition from sanitary pads to menstrual cups. When Andeasand states that "finding your cup could be life and climate changing" (18), the comics' role extends beyond merely accentuating lived experience to educate readers about broader social and environmental concerns.

One of the comic panels associates a forceful sneeze with an unexpected menstrual spill, emphasising the loss of bodily control by employing a visual metaphor. The image of blood gushing like water from a tap and blood flooding the corridor outside the seminar hall can be read as pictorial metaphors, the concept proposed by Elizabeth El Refaie. The visualisation of blood in the place of water from a tap symbolizes heavy menstrual flow; this substitution of blood for water is identified as a pictorial metaphor which refers to an "image of concrete, recognizable object [water] that is used to stand for something else [blood]" (Refaie 16). Similarly, the flooding of corridors with blood also highlights the uncontrollability of the natural physiological phenomenon, continuing to interfere with both personal and institutional spaces.

Chapter four of *A Drip. A Drop. A Deluge* presents Ramya, a middle-aged woman struggling with irregular menstrual cycle, takes up excessive pressure and eventually tries to "fix

[herself] inside and out" (Andeasand 22). She constantly operates under stress in different ways to prove herself that she is "kind, enough and worth" (22) the efforts put in. Her non-negotiable attitude towards exercising, eating healthy and following a skin care routine drags her to the point of mental exhaustion leading to loss of balance in life, represented through visual humour. Suppositions on the connection and synchronicity between a woman's menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle of the moon remain contested through various quantitative research studies. These studies analysed whether the period cycle of women and the lunar cycle has any inherent connection, which resulted in contradictory claims by various researchers in different geographical and social settings. The comic deals with this contested idea with light-hearted humour when Ramya's menstrual cycle resumes to normal after huge effort, situating an image of onset of her period adjacent to the panel with the full moon, signifying the rhythmic pattern of menstrual cycle and lunar cycle as "sync complete" (25).

The fifth chapter of *A Drip. A Drop. A Deluge* titled "Morphine Time" emphasises the premenstrual symptoms and its associated discomfort experienced by the character, Rina. It foregrounds the casual disregard with which society and the workplace often treat women's PMS, thereby showing how such dismissals intensify the difficulties of navigating menstruation alongside professional obligations. Rina is physically, mentally and emotionally drained even after trying to ease the pain by having a coffee, the irritation persists and continues to affect her work. Rina's comment, "I am not even productive but I can't go home" (Andeasand 28) emphasises the indecisiveness imposed by the troublesome situation, and the lack of welfare policies in workplaces with regard to PMS.

The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies highlights how policies advocating menstrual leave for women can also pave way for detrimental consequences and it further necessitates the need for research in analysing how menstrual leave "may be counterproductive to the overall welfare of menstruators" due to "discrimination in hiring practices, salaries or wages, and promotion" (Levitt and Barnack-Tavlaris 561, 562). Accordingly, Rina's experience in her workplace should not be viewed at an individual level, rather as a universal problem encountered by almost every working woman. This accentuates the need for menstrual policies to be reframed, ensuring whether it addresses "diverse worker needs" and confirms that it does "not perpetuate discrimination" (572). Levitt and Barnack-Tavlaris suggestively concludes that challenging and dismantling menstrual stigma and myths within and outside of workplaces is crucial for the well-being of menstruators, that would aid in developing better policy making (572).

As Heather Dillaway observes, perimenopause and menopause are characterized by uncertainty and constant change, and learning to live with this unpredictability becomes part of everyday life during this transition (253). The final chapter of the graphic narrative unfolds the emotional instability triggered by perimenopausal symptoms such as hot flashes and brain fog. The perimenopausal years demand vigilance towards one's own body, restricting complete functioning in personal and social settings. The chapter ends with a humorous note on how the woman can possibly have a "fully functioning brain" and enjoy a "long dance party" in postmenopausal life. (Andeasand 37).

This paper has argued that the graphic narrative employs visual metaphor, humour and sequential form to represent menstruation as a materially and socially situated experience rather than a merely private bodily occurrence. By navigating menstruation from menarche to menopause, the comic exposes the persistence of stigma while registering the bodily discomfort, emotional strain and social regulation that shape

menstrual experience. The narrative converts personal vulnerability into critical visibility, making it a graphic feminist counter-discourse that challenges dominant narratives grounded in silence, shame and normalization around menstruation. Thus, the graphic narrative acts as a site of embodied knowledge, resistance and agency, accompanied with humour and graphic possibility.

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