

## **A THING THEORY ANALYSIS OF MENSTRUAL NARRATIVES: UNRAVELLING THE POLITICS OF AGENCY**

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### **Abstract**

Menstrual art, which emerged during the 1970s, was employed by the second-wave feminists to volatilize the dominant patriarchal values of society through a recuperation of what was considered grossly physical and therefore taboo within mainstream discourse. Art, often used as a medium to challenge the status quo, has most often cleaved to the proclivities of those who intend to make a recreational end of it. Nonetheless, menstrual art constitutes an exception to this privileged esoterism in that its *raison d'être* is derived from the immediacy of feminine experience and not the ivory-tower of vapid theorization. The present paper attempts to study menstrual art using “thing theory,” and in so doing, understand how it counteracts dominant narratives. It also attempts to shed light on the recent ontological shift that has happened in literary theory from anthropocentric to non-human subjects.

**Keywords:** agency, menstrual art, subversion, thing theory

### **Introduction**

Menstruation, though a purely biological process that happens as a part of a woman’s monthly cycle, is commonly viewed as taboo in almost every culture, and any open discussion of it discouraged, or at least, compelled to be veiled by means of a welter of innocuous metaphorical references. It is against this stifling background that a major upheaval took place in the arts in the 1970s with feminist creativity seeking to disengage itself from phallogocentric networks of power and the canons of “good art” as laid down by them. By deliberately choosing topics considered to pose a threat to masculine authority, these works of art inaugurated a new sensibility based on the politics of repulsiveness. Aimed at shocking audiences into a realisation of the patriarchal prejudices on which general aesthetic standards rest, these works were effective in activating a new perspective that acknowledged and valued differences. Whereas the vital flow of a woman’s body was a subject to be dealt with only by the medical sciences in the past, now it became the privileged domain of the arts. Capturing the embodied experience of menstruation in symbolic forms helped shatter the stranglehold of phallogocentrism over the cultural imaginary and corporealize feminist politics that had so long been tied to an inexigent abstraction. The present paper, which employs “Thing Theory” to study menstrual art as a tool that subverts patriarchal power structures, argues in favour of the agency of menstrual artefacts in rearticulating the flawed discourse of menstruation.

The feminist art of the 1970s was successful in launching a counternarrative to the dominant patriarchal attitudes of the period mostly because of its unremitting activism that combined a desecration of the socially sacred with an informed critique of the grounds on which women were oppressed and victimized. It was the conviction that women did not have to relate to their own bodies with feelings running the gamut from shame to embarrassment that led to the inauguration of menstrual art. As a

crystallization of the feminist protest against male-oriented aesthetic principles, menstrual art challenged the superficial narratives of menstruation through bold representations of monthly cycles. It consisted of photographs, videos, exhibitions, installations, and canvas drawings that used menstrual blood. Menstrual artists used objects like tampons and pads to redefine the stereotypical representations of menstruation in popular culture and medical texts.

Centuries of anthropocentric history proves that “things” were most often relegated to the background as passive and insignificant. They were primarily looked upon as the means by which the human could attain its cherished ends rather than autonomous entities. Dissatisfied with domination of anthropocentric influences in the highest echelons of literary theory, a new crop of thinkers like Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Bill Brown, and so on attempted to veer critical thought away from the human and towards the vibrant materiality of things. This paradigm shift in theory happened in congruence with a radical reevaluation of anthropocentric underpinnings in the field of art. Things, which were since then neglected by mainstream artists as props to a human world, suddenly moved from the margins to the limelight.

Around the globe, many religious and cultural practices view menstruation as impure, monstrous, polluted, and any free expression of it is condemned or looked upon with scorn. The dominant cultural story on menstruation has invariably stated that “the reproductive body is an abject monstrosity that needs careful regulation and control, and is the root of feminine evil’ (Ussher 17). Although there have been tremendous changes to such retrogressive attitudes, thanks to feminist activism, menstruation is still stigmatized whenever questions of periodic disorder, emotional instability, or premenstrual dysphoric disorder are discussed. As a result, many women are still influenced by such negative patriarchal misrepresentations in their thinking about period blood. It is this dominant cultural story that menstrual art attempts to overturn by reconceptualizing the menstruating woman’s experience as a radical state of wild and unbridled creativity. Menstrual art aims to transgress the hermetic boundary between the clean and the defiled body, depicting the body as inherently prone to “impurities.” Artistic committed to articulating the stigma surrounding menstruation present the hush-hush subject of period blood from new and daring perspectives to open our eyes to a complex biological phenomenon that is taken for granted.

### **The “Thingness” of Menstrual Art**

Women’s health movements, environmentalism, and consumer activism came together in the 1970s to give birth to a new movement called menstrual activism. It raised questions about the safety of using menstrual products, and more crucially, tried to challenge the existing notions of menstruation as a despicable bodily function. The various methods and strategies that the activists employed include social media campaigns, social protests, conferences, workshops, legal interventions, art, literature, and film. Menstrual art was one among the many forms of protest. It depicted menstruation in a manner contrary to popular media representations that stressed its polluted and unhygienic nature. It attempted to make invisible narratives whose traces are excised from public platforms by dominant cultural trends more than visible.

Menstrual art now realizes that it is not enough to make the prejudicial discourse around periods visible but that it has to be done aggressively and rebelliously. It created an open feminist space that gives women the wherewithal to challenge misconceptions and taboos that exist in connection with menstruation. It was mainly through the use of objects like sanitary napkins, tampons, cups, and so on

related to menstruation that menstrual art attempted to demolish popular narratives about the female body as inherently “polluted.” It mobilized the paraphernalia of menstruation to highlight the manner in which the female body is transformed into a zone of crisis with the onset of menstruation. Rather than sweeping under the carpet these objects reminiscent of the body’s “imperfection,” menstrual art encourages a celebration of their invisible “afterlives.”

Menstrual art can commonly be divided into three categories: art that centres on depictions or use of menstrual blood; artworks exploring the engagement between the female body and menstrual products; and artworks that represent menstruating bodies from a non-sexist perspective. It is primarily with the second category which examines the material culture associated with menstruation that this paper deals with. Menstrual products break the singular narrative of menstruation and present alternative narratives from the perspective of menstruating women. Artists have come to seek the aid of things to inscribe a different take of menstruation. Thing Theory, which focuses on human-object interactions, in literature and culture, traces its pedigree back to Martin Heidegger’s object/thing distinction. Martin Heidegger states that an object becomes a thing when it can no longer serve its assigned function. When an object breaks down, it is liberated from its socially fixed value and becomes present to us in novel ways. He mentions the distinct nature of a thing as one that exceeds the functional value indexed to it by human beings. Objects exist in a relational network where they perform pre-ordained roles that are repeated through the ages till their “thingness” is obscured and reduced to only use-value.

According to thing theory, things or objects do not assume a background position, but act as agents that can cause changes. Some theorists opine that objects are innately built with agency, or have the capacity to produce differences. Webster’s dictionary defines agency as “the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power; a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved” (36). Thing Theory inaugurates a theory of art based neither on conventional ideas of aesthetics nor on visual communication but on the distinctive role art plays in subverting normative structures. Art objects are usually looked upon as expressions of the artist’s agency. As such, they tend to be highly complex adjustments of form, balance, and rhythm to which we generally apply the label “aesthetics.”

The traditional perspective is that not all objects function as art objects. Also, it is thought that art objects can be recognized intuitively. We recognize the painting of a beautiful woman as an art object because it is a very ingenious balance of restraint and exuberance, realism and fantasy, and style and content. However, the traditional definition does not cover representations of menstruating women since menstruation was thought to be a process that falls outside the ambit of art. But this is where Thing Theory helps us unravel the mechanisms of aesthetic cognition with historical insight. It unmask the canonical work of art as the product of specific historical circumstances whose aesthetic biases congealed in time to enforce the separation between the beautiful and the vulgar. Looked at from this altered perspective, an installation made using menstrual pads, remains not just as an assortment of blood-stained pieces of cotton. Rather, it serves a very subversive political function as the reminder of the resilience of those elements of femininity that are demonized and kept outside discursive domains. It becomes enmeshed in a complex signifying system that transforms it from a sanitary pad into an artefact that bears the imprimatur of the patriarchal society’s denigration.

Judy Chicago’s “Red Flag” (1971), a photolithograph depicting a menstruating woman removing a tampon from her vagina, Carolee Schneemann’s “Blood Work Diary” (1972), artistically portraying menstrual cycle using tissue paper, and Casey Jenkins’ “Casting Off My Womb” (2013), showing the artist knitting a piece of cloth she inserted in vagina, and Poulomi Basu’s “A Ritual of Exile: Blood

Speaks” (2017) are the varied ways in which the menstrual activists-cum-artists employ “things” to subvert the patriarchal conception of menstruation as a “curse.” Judy Chicago’s “Red Flag” which depicts a menstruator pulling a bloodied tampon out of her vagina, which is commonly accepted as the first image depicting menstruation in western art, serves as a portal to our understanding of the power and versatility of things. The photo-lithograph at once deflates the libidinal urge directed at it by the male observer through the association it forges between the profile of the spraddled legs with their usual suggestion of eroticism and the spectacle of menstrual blood. Here the material properties of blood combine with their symbolic potential. Chicago’s work elucidates the need for subversive art to integrate the body and the “things” that carry the vestiges of its repudiation into a relational framework. Only such a “somaesthetics” based on rediscovering the vibrant materiality of things can reorient the popular discourse on the menstruating body from a non-sexist perspective.

### Conclusion

Judith Butler reminds us how gender becomes crystallized through performative acts. Her conception of gender as a kind of performance aids us in interpreting menstrual blood as “gendered” and in recognizing how the “leak-prone” female body is always pitted against the sealed male body in an oppositional schema. She argues that the male body always retains its affinity with ideas of concreteness whereas the female body is conceived of as “fluid.” Further, the practise of menstrual etiquette which takes on the likeness of a top-secret operation hides the menstruating body from the public eye, thus creating the misconception that the leaky body is unnatural. But it is this misconception that menstrual art attempts to burst asunder by highlighting the inevitable leakiness of the menstruating body along with the intense regimen of blockading the vaginal orifice using pads and tampons during periods. This paradoxical relationship that menstrual products have with the female body—that of sanitizing and rendering invisible the embarrassing fluidity of menstrual experience while at the same time proclaiming it in their “afterlife” as things— is important from the perspective of menstrual art. Menstrual products facilitate the production of a liminal space where notions of sanctity can coexist with those of profanation and demolish ideas of bodily normativity. Menstrual art also highlights how the menstrual product industry promotes notions of “the good female body” by building spurious associations between menstrual hygiene and the most bashful form of secrecy. In doing so, it not only checks the aggregation of stereotypes around menstruators but also paves way for a new culture based on acceptance rather than the stressful tolerance of menstrual blood.

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