

## **Finger on your Lips:**

### **Indian Sanitary Napkin Advertisements and the Culture of Silence**

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#### **Abstract**

Menstruation, a biological process of every woman's body, is a gross taboo in all cultures. Studies suggest that not only do the taboos have a discriminatory effect but they also affect the sanitation habits of women. These taboos reflect in the ads of sanitary napkins which cannot escape talking about menstruation and yet they do. Indian sanitary napkin advertisements, while using slogans like 'choice' and 'freedom', reinforce a narrative of layered control over women's bodies. The use of 'choice' and 'freedom' is in fact the most interesting aspect of these ads because while they talk about empowerment, they end up making menstruation, an intrinsic part of a woman's body and a natural biological process, a bane and a hindrance in their life which shouldn't be talked about. In this paper, I have studied how the sanitary napkin advertisements reinforce the culture of silence around menstruation.

Keywords: Sanitary Napkin Advertisements, Menstrual Cycle, Menstrual Taboos, Female Body, Gender in Media, Media Representations of Women.

#### **Introduction**

*Two women are sitting on a bench, holding files in their hands. One girl is very excited while the other seems tense. Suddenly, the girl who is tensed gets up at the pretext of looking at something on the notice board, looks over her shoulder, signals something worriedly to the other girl who then quietly gives her the thumbs up signaling 'all is okay'. The girl heaves a sigh of relief, smiles and comes back to the bench. The other girl then whispers in her ear, "Kapda use karogi toh daag ka dar toh rahega na. Fir interview pe concentrate kaise karogi/If you use a cloth, you will always be wary of staining. Then how will you concentrate on the interview." She then looks around and passes a bag to her saying, "Yahi soch toh badalni hai/This is what we have to change." The girl opens the bag to find a packet of Stayfree secure and her face lights up. The other girl continues, "Stayfree secure. Better suraksha deta hai/Gives better protection." A background song starts simultaneously with that, "Chalti hun yeh jahaan badalne ke liye, dil men yeh umange leke, ke bhaage man hawa ke sang, khwabon ko liye/ I walk to change this world, with hope in my heart, I run with wind with dreams in my heart" The girls then get up and receive their interview letters. They rejoice and climb down the stairs saying "Ab waqt hai, badalne ka/now is the time to change".*

While at first glance, the scenario comes across as a narration of two progressive women looking out for themselves, this advertisement of a sanitary napkin is in fact, steeped deep in layers of regression – of shame, oppression and silence around the female body and its natural process, menstruation.

The problem that I have tried to discuss and demonstrate in this paper is that Indian sanitary napkin advertisements, while using slogans like 'choice' and 'freedom', reinforce a narrative of layered control over women's bodies. I have used textual analysis to analyze Indian sanitary napkin advertisements and have studied the narrative around menstruation in these advertisements, how they reinforce the culture of silence around menstruation and how they construct layered control over women's lives.

## **An Impure Ritual: Menstruation and its Taboos**

Menstruation is a process that occurs in the female body, triggered during puberty when every child's reproductive organs are developing. The reproductive period of the human being continues from about the age of 13 years to 45-50 years. In girls, this period is marked by a characteristic event repeated almost every month in the form of menstrual flow. It may be temporarily stopped only by pregnancy. The process of menstruation is when the egg, that was supposed to be fertilized with a sperm, does not get fertilized due to the absence of sperm and is discharged through the vagina as menstrual discharge every 28 days. This discharge lasts for 3-5 days. As the uterus prepares itself for fertilization every month, it builds a uterine lining as well, which also sheds during menstruation causing blood vessels to rupture. The process can start any time after puberty, when it is called menarche, lasting for about 30-35 years and ends at the age of 45-50 which is called menopause. The generation of the egg essentially means that a woman is capable of bearing a child subject to the presence of the male sperm and signifies a healthy body.

However, menstruation has always had many taboos associated with it. In India, a part of the taboo is brought out by the restrictions surrounding the days when a woman is going through her menstrual cycle. They are often not being allowed to enter the kitchen or cook. Touching holy books or offering prayers is not permitted. In some cases, women are forbidden from looking at themselves in the mirror during this cycle and there are also certain food restrictions.

(Kumar & Srivastava, 2011)

While physical restrictions are at play, the cycle itself is never talked about. The menstrual cycle, while being representative of a healthy body and of fertility, is commonly talked about in hushed terms and almost never in front of a male member. The 'culture of silence', as I have called it, exists around menstruation for every girl where she is taught to stay quiet and be secretive about the phenomenon.

Paulo Freire first used the phrase ‘culture of silence’ in his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005) in context of the poor third world countries and their education. Freire formulated that the culture of silence is perpetuated by those in power in order to keep others under their subordination.

Feminist discourses have adopted the term to denote how this culture of silence works towards the subordination of women. Feminists see the culture of silence in women who are victims of violence of any kind. In her essay ‘A Swirling Power Quadruple Interplay: Misogyny, Violence, Silence and Voice’ on violence against women in Kenya, Kerubo Abuya (2014) talks about ‘silence’s role in sustaining the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures that are embedded in the myriad visible violent behaviors and cultural artifacts along with the invisible values, assumptions and beliefs that are embodied in our cultures.’

The silence around the violation of one’s body, sexually or in assault, arises from the notion that women’s bodies carry the honour of the family upon themselves and a violation of the body damages the honour. As Kanchan Mathur (2008) writes in her paper *Body as Space, Body as Site: Bodily Integrity and Women’s Empowerment in India*, “virginity and chastity are virtues...the typical image of a “good woman” is still one who upholds the honour of the family, maintains the “culture of silence” prevailing in the private domain...” (Mathur, 2008, p. 55)

Thus, the woman is not allowed to talk freely about sexuality, sexual desires and anything pertaining to the body, which includes menstruation. While being representative of fertility, menstruation also signifies sexual development of the female body – after all, the egg is being fertilized in anticipation of the sperm which would be provided by the male body through intercourse. The sexuality needs to be protected until formal ties, like marriage, are established for intercourse. The inclusion of intercourse in the discourse around menstruation partly leads to the formation of taboos around menstruation. This culture of silence leads to practical problems:

for instance women don't understand their bodies because they are never allowed to talk about it.

Kerstin Jurlander, in her study "*Wash your hair and keep a lemon – the experience of menstruation among adolescent girls in South India*" talks about the lack of menstrual knowledge among girls and even the lack of basic knowledge about their bodies. While in Tamil Nadu, girls were wary of talking about their bodies and did not know where their reproductive organs were, in an urban slum in Delhi, the girls are unprepared for menstruation and had 'very little knowledge about what happened in their bodies.' In Rajasthan, the girls were only told about the restrictions that they had to face during menstruation and no other information was provided. (Jurlander, 2012)

The other discourse around women's bodies has always been sensitive. The bodies need to be perfect according to dominant social norms. They are subject to regimes that force them to maintain 'perfect' bodies, which are ideally thin, fair, hairless, and exist without any bodily fluids like sweat, spit or menstruation. Shame is not only then associated with not talking about the female body. A perfect body's association with menstruation can only be that of shame because it blemishes the body and thus, shame or a necessity to hide menstruation becomes an imperative to market a sanitary napkin.

The necessity to hide is followed by a validation for it by bringing the idea of 'empowerment'. The empowerment narrative may be well explained through ideology and its ways of working. While the products come with a promise of empowerment, they have certain stereotypically regressive ideas about representation of genders. Louis Althusser notes that,

"Ideology is encountered in the practices of everyday life and not simply in certain ideas about everyday life... [it] is the way in which certain rituals and customs have the effect of binding us to the social order: a social order that is marked by enormous inequalities of wealth, status and power... they offer pleasure and release from the usual demands of

the social order, but that, ultimately, they return us to our places in the social order, refreshed and ready to tolerate our exploitation and oppression until the next official break comes along.” (Storey, 2008, pp. 4-5)

The ideology of protection and shame, thus, reigns supreme by providing a seemingly different outlet of empowerment.

Using these themes and ideas formatively, I have employed textual analysis to examine Indian sanitary napkin advertisements. I have tried to analyse the various layers of text and sound that contribute to building the discourse of shame. Textual analysis may be defined as a method employed to “obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them.” (McKee 2003:1)

Roland Barthes propounded the theory of the denotations and connotations, following from Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of signifier and signified. According to Saussure, the ‘signifier’ dog ‘signifies’ a four-legged canine creature. Barthes added a new layer of meaning, arguing that ‘this indicates only primary signification’. In the secondary level of meaning ‘dog’ can also refer to an ‘unpleasant human being.’ (Storey 2008)

“[Barthes] claims that it is at the level of secondary signification or connotation that myth is produced for consumption. By myth he means ideology understood as a body of ideas and practices, which by actively promoting the values and interests of dominant groups in society defend the prevailing structures of power.” (Storey 2008:119)

It is at these secondary levels that the ideologies of these advertisements can be deciphered. The elements to be looked at for a textual analysis are:

- Form: The shape of the text and the way it appears before us. Some of the components of the form are:

- Frame: Size of the image, placing of the elements in the image, if anything has been removed from the image – all these determine whether the image is dominant or isolated.
- Distance: Whether the shot is an extreme long shot or extreme close up, whether it is a mid-long shot – this distance from the camera helps to determine the closeness to the characters in the narrative determined by how comfortable the filmmaker wants the audience to be with a particular scene.
- Content: The content is what is actually inside the frame: the subject of the text and how that subject is presented to us. The content is made up of:
  - The subject(s).
  - The focus of the shot the setting: Tilts, tracks and zoom in-zoom outs are used to give more contexts to the narrative of the film.
  - Extra-diegetic sound: This is the sound that comes from outside the film and is usually the background song which is used to reflect the mood of the film.

(Bainbridge, Goc, Tynan 2011)

Being audio-visual in nature, television advertisements have all the above elements that may be analysed for a second level meaning. An advertisement – or a moving image – has form and content in addition to camera work. All of these work at the level of connotation, working not only to denote movement but also to denote power hierarchies and dominant ideologies.

“Advertising is one of the oldest forms of media it informs much of the media we consume, as advertising provides the main source of income for media owners advertising orientates the range of entertainment and information produced by the media toward those audiences advertisers want to reach.” (Bainbridge, Goc, Tynan 2011:230)

Textual analysis takes into consideration all the elements of a text and analyses them for connotations and how they work in the interest of certain people and against the interests of certain people.

**“Unless you tell someone, it’s your secret.”<sup>1</sup>**

Based on the methodology, I have created categories and picked up elements from advertisements that suit these categories. The ‘image’ is the picture that is seen on television and the image constructed of the people in the ad, the voiceover or background song that is usually in tandem with the ‘mood’ of the advertisement, the text or explanatory words that appear on screen and the spoken ‘dialogue’. All these categories lead into each other, forming a layer over the other to form meaning that is explained through secondary texts and interpretations.

Each category has listed some examples that examine how menstruation is being talked about in that category, thus examining how the silence around menstruation is created in advertisements.

### ***1. Dialogue***

*A girl is getting ready to join the army. She is packing her bags for her training when her mother asks her, “Lekin un dino men kya karogi/ What will you do during those days?”*

In this scene from Stayfree ‘army’ advertisement, the conversation is happening inside a room between two women and they refrain from using the word ‘periods’ or ‘menstruation’. Out of the 10 ads I looked at, 9 don’t use the word menstruation or ‘periods’. Out of these 9 ads, 6

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<sup>1</sup> Houppert 1999:82. Houppert, Karen. *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.



don't refer to it at all and 3 use veiled terms to refer to it, either in Hindi or in English. Some more examples are:

‘Those five days’: A Kotex advertisement for its sanitary napkin uses the phrase ‘those five days’ throughout the ad as their jingle. The ad begins with a song with the words, “Do you hate being a girl, on those five days?” where the words ‘on those five days’ are repeated thrice. The chorus says, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” The girls in the ads also flash their palms to show five days. In the final segment of the ad, the voiceover says “celebrate being a girl” and the song continues the sentence “even in those five days”.

Silence: In the Whisper Choice ‘Dance’ ad, when the girl feels worried about performing in the dance show, she gives a troubled expression and runs inside the bedroom. The mother follows her to know what happened. The girl, her face still sad, says, ‘I can win but...’ and she doesn't complete her statement but the mother has already understood it as she smiles an assuring smile that says she has a solution.

This absence of a direct reference or a reference to menstruation without actually using the term seems to be the hallmark of all sanitary napkin ads. Not only do the ads not refer to the term in conversation, even when there is a product demonstration there is no mention of why the product is used. The other 6 ads have narratives where the conversation between the people in the ad or the conversation between the viewer and the producer in the ad is carried on the basis of a mutual agreement that both the parties understand what is being talked about. Even though there is product demonstration and conversations about the ‘pad’, ‘napkin’ and ‘stains’, there are no references to menstruation.

In the Don't Worry ‘hockey’ ad, the girls talk about the ‘pad’ but neither of the girls needs to be told that this is about menstruation and there is no mention of the term. The girls even hush up their voices when they are talking about the pad.

In the Don't Worry 'waterfall' ad and Kotex 'gym' ad, there is only product demonstration and no conversation between protagonists about the pad.

In the Sofy '*shakti*' ad, the girl doesn't mention menstruation in conversation but mentions her 'napkin'.

In the Stayfree 'job interview' ad and Whisper 'college' ad, the girls talk about stains, '*upari geelapan*' and general discomfort but don't mention the source or the cause of this.

These ads incumbently play upon the notion of silence and the awkwardness around menstruation that girls have harbored from a young age. When Karen Houppert, author of *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo: Menstruation*, conducted a focus group discussion for her book and spoke to young girls aged 10 years to 11 years about menstruation, the girls were not just shy in talking about menstruation but also knew there was something wrong about saying the word 'period' out loud. (Houppert, 1999, pp. 51-52)

The omission of the word is followed by enforcing the idea of shame by not letting the 'secret' spill out in public by way of hiding stains or smell.

## **2. Voiceover**

A voiceover in an ad is the voice of the creator and delivers the most important message of the ad. They convey to us the function that the product will perform that might benefit us. According to the ad, the essential function of a sanitary napkin is to prevent staining. However, it is not seen as something that is technically dirty but is masked in the idea of protection. This is articulated by using certain terminologies. 6 out of 10 ads use words that indicate that sanitary napkins protect you from staining.

- In the Sofy ‘*shakti*’ ad, the voiceover describes the product as it is demonstrated, “Sofy bodyfit slim, with three way leakage control. Double absorbent core fits the body, multi-leak control lines for leakage control and shape maintenance system keeps the pad in shape – *taaki aap protected rahen lambe samay tak/so that you remain protected for a long time.*”
- In the Sofy ‘side walls’ ad, the protagonist explains that girls fear that their image will get stained and because of Sofy, they don’t need to worry about staining. The product is demonstrated as the voiceover explains, “Sofy side walls. *Iske unique flexible sidewalls side leakage na hone de aur lambe samay tak sokhen/It’s unique flexible sidewalls prevent side leakage and absorb for a long period of time.*”
- In the Stayfree ‘army’ ad, the girl is protected from stains as the product demonstration tells the viewers that, “*Iska suraksha centre pad ke beech men zyada sokhe aur de daag se behtar do guni behtar suraksha/Its protection centre absorbs more in the centre and gives two times better protection from staining.*”
- In the Stayfree ‘job interview’ ad, the girl says that the pad gives better protection from stains. The voiceover demonstration of the product says, “*Stayfree secure wings men hai super absorb centre aur leak protect design, jiske saath yeh sokhe paanch guna zyada/Stayfree secure wings has super absorb centre and leak protect design because of which it absorbs five times better.*”
- In the Whisper ‘dance’ ad, the mother shows her daughter the product and explains its qualities, “*Wagt aa gaya whisper choice wings apnane ka, jo kapde ki tarah mudta ya sarakta nabin, bana rehta hai aur deta hai daag se behtar suraksha/It’s time to start using whisper choice wings which doesn’t shift from its position unlike cloth and gives you better protection from stains.*”

- In the Whisper ‘college’ ad, the girl complains of wetness (one can presume she is talking about the pad) which makes it difficult for her to walk quickly like her friends. The voiceover demonstration says, “*Iske naye top sheet mein hain 50% larger holes, jo sokhe zyada ek hi second mein/it has a new top sheet with 50% larger holes that absorb a lot within one second.*”

The words that are used to tell the viewer about the benefits of the sanitary napkin are chosen in a way that makes menstruation something one needs to be ‘protected’ against, enforcing the shame. The product description is in the form of words like ‘protection center’, ‘secure’ wings, keep you ‘protected’ all day and ‘fear’ of stain. Menstrual blood shouldn’t ‘leak out’ in the literal sense as well as in the sense that no one should get to know about it. The brands themselves are named Whisper, Stayfree and Don’t Worry, all pointing towards a protection from it, ultimately harping the same narrative – it will be shameful if anyone else finds out about it.

The shame associated with staining is limited only to sanitary napkin advertisements. Surf Excel’s advertising campaign ‘*Daag Achhe Hain/Stains are good*<sup>2</sup> is not only saying that stains are not a problem for anyone, they also go ahead and show them. These, however, are limited to mud, food, shoe polish, paint and other regular stains. Menstrual stains are omitted from these ads.

The idea of menstruation being ‘shameful’ comes from the polluting nature of menstruation that all women believe in, evident in the restrictions imposed on them during and the taboos associated with menstruation. Kerstin Jurlander, in her study “*Wash your hair and keep a lemon – the experience of menstruation among adolescent girls in South India*”, posits that “the notions of menstruation and the rules about uncleanness are deeply rooted in the Hindu mind, even though the everyday practice changes over time.” (Jurlander, 2012, p. 25) She talks about middle-aged women in Banaras who have conceded to the fact that they are unclean and therefore do not

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.hul.co.in/brands-in-action/detail/Why-we-think-Daag-Achhe-Hain/306334/>

participate in rituals and religious ceremonies. “For some, the restrictions were connected with the feelings of loneliness and shame.” (Jurlander, 2012, p. 25)

Houppert (1999) gives the example of Tambrands, an American tampon brand, in her book where the brand answers a common query that girls have: ‘will anyone ever get to know about the fact that I am menstruating?’ “Tambrands answers: no, “unless you tell someone, it’s your secret.” And, by the way, in order to keep it that way here’s some advice. Use tampons, not pads, “so you don’t have to worry about odor.” Use biodegradable tampons and applicators, since flushing them down the toilet is “a good way to help keep your period private.” (Houppert 1999:82) Even though Indian ads don’t say it out loud – keep your period private – they do so in a number of implicit ways. It’s spilling out or leaking out is prevented by not only not speaking about it and by protection from stains but also by talking about it in a private space.

### ***3. Image***

The advertisers carefully choose the spaces in which menstruation is talked about. The characters in these ads are always shown to be in what can be described as private spaces within the architecture of the advertisements. These private spaces could be a bedroom, as distinct from the living room, a secluded corner in a public space or even inside a toilet. The ads emphasize the need to treat menstruation as a private affair not to be spoken about with everyone and anywhere. “Nice girls may talk about bleeding in the *privacy* of their...bedrooms, but nice girls never talk about it elsewhere.” (Emphasis mine. Houppert, 1999, p. 71)

Five out of ten ads show a shift in the space from public to private or show a private space for talking about menstruation.

- Shifting from public to private:

- In the Whisper Choice ‘Dance’ advertisement, the girl runs inside the bedroom from the living room. The conversation between the mother and the daughter happens in a long shot with the audience placed at the door, looking into their private life. The audience is made privy to what goes on inside the bedroom, thus confining the discussion of menstruation to a closed space.
- In the Don’t Worry ‘Hockey’ ad, the captain of the team rushes inside the dressing room and her friend follows her through. Inside, they talk about the benefits of a gel based sanitary napkin over cotton pads as the camera zooms in to their faces when they talk about it, again indicating a closed space.
- Remaining in the private space:
  - In the Sofy ‘side walls’ ad, the girl mentions the word ‘periods’ once and describes the problems girls seem to face about it inside her home. It is only when she has solved the problem of staining does she steps out of her home.
  - In the Kotex ad where girls are meditating to soft music and boys are working out to rock music, the space between the two is clearly demarcated by a glass wall between their areas of working out and meditation.
  - In the Stayfree sanitary napkin ad, the two girls are already sitting away from the rest of the public and they are talking about the product in hushed tones.

The ads also emphasize that not only is menstruation to be spoken about in ‘secret’ but even the product itself has to be kept insulated from the public gaze. The relationship between the product and the consumer is almost exalted to the level of an intensely private and exclusive relationship. In the advertisements under study this insulation of the product from public recognition is done in various ways:

- In the Stayfree ‘job interview’ ad, one girl hands the sanitary napkin packet to the other girl through her bag and the packet never comes out. The camera has to ‘peep in’ her bag in order to see what’s being exchanged.
- In the Whisper ‘college’ advertisement, the girls take their friend inside the washroom and there they are able to take out the packet to show her its benefit. There is no ‘peeping-in’ in this ad.
- In Sofy ‘*shakti*’ ad, the camera has to peep in the bag which is kept in a fairly public space.
- In the Sofy ‘side walls’ ad, the sanitary napkin packet is kept out in the open but in the washroom of the home of the protagonist.

The only time the sanitary napkin comes out is in the private space. Placement of packet reinforces the ‘private’ domain of the sanitary napkin. The girl in the Sofy ad talks about the issues girls face because of the fear of stain. She could also have talked about these same problems outside the house especially since her words refer to public spaces (“*periods mein office nahi jaogi, party nahi karogi*”). But the idea is to not let menstruation spill into the public space.

Jurlander’s study mentions that for the girls in an urban slum in Delhi, “menstruation was a subject that was rarely discussed either in public or within the families....” (Jurlander, 2012, p. 20) Her study also talks about the girls in Rajasthan who used washable cloth during menstruation and “[t]he cloths were usually washed with soap, but then unfortunately often stored in unhygienic places, not to risk others to see it stored their sanitary napkins.” (Houppert, 1999, p. 21)

Once they have successfully restricted menstruation to the private space and made sure it is not ‘spilled out’ in the public, they go on to ideas of choice in women’s lives and empowerment of women. The ads talk about the impact of menstruation in women’s lives and how hiding it facilitates success in their lives.

#### ***4. Background Song and Tagline***

The background song or extra-diegetic sound sets the mood for any ad film (Bainbridge, et al., 2011). After confining menstruation to the private space, the ads culminate their message in the emancipation of women. The advertisements emphasize on the use of these sanitary napkins for growth and success in life. All these ads show success and confidence in women's lives. They not only show successful women, the tagline of their ad and their background songs reinforce notions of success.

- Professional Success
  - In the Don't Worry 'hockey' ad, when the captain takes care of the problem of menstruation by wearing the sanitary napkin, she goes on to win the match. The background song says, "Now you don't need to stop."
  - In the Stayfree 'job interview' ad, out of the two women, one doesn't use Stayfree and she is worried and tensed. But once she is introduced to Stayfree, she not only becomes more confident, she goes on to get the interview call letter. Again, the background song 'I walk to change the world with hope in my heart, now my mind runs free like the wind and I walk with all my dreams with me' alludes to success.
  - In the Stayfree 'army' ad, the girl keeps her 'morale boosted' by the use of the sanitary napkin. Again, the background song is 'I walk to change the world with hope in my heart, now my mind runs free like the wind and I walk with all my dreams with me'.
  - In the Whisper 'Dance' ad, the girl is protected by the sanitary napkin that she is wearing and she goes on to win the dance competition and the background song says 'now when we move, we won't be stopped'.



- Choice to have fun:
  - In the Sofy 'side walls' ad, the girl mentions all the fun things that girls miss out on due to the fear of staining. Girls don't work, don't party, don't wear fancy clothes because of periods but with the sanitary napkin, they have the choice to do all these things and be stain free.
  - In Don't Worry 'Waterfall' advertisement shows three girls having fun in the water while one is sitting aloof, reading a book. When the other girls start troubling her, she uses sanitary napkin as her weapon to absorb all the water that was 'staining' her book. With a sly smile on her face, she manages to tackle the people who were troubling her. She takes care of the problem of menstruation by using Don't Worry sanitary napkin and does this with a smile on her face.
  - In the Kotex 'gym' ad, the girls decide to have some fun and tease the boys and do it in the presence of the yoga teacher. The girls know how to have fun even during menstruation because they are protected by the sanitary napkin.
- Confidence:
  - In the Kotex 'those five days' ad, the girls who are not using the sanitary napkin have to pretend to be men during those five days. But the girl who has the sanitary napkin is able to discard the manly clothes and wear the dress that she likes, strut confidently and be around men. She is celebrating 'being a girl'.
  - In the Sofy '*shakti*' ad, the girl has the confidence to tackle troublemakers, an eve teaser in this advertisement.
  - In the Whisper 'college' advertisement, the girl defeats a boy in the race to a seat in class.

Success is also alluded to in the taglines of these advertisements.

- In the Stayfree ‘job interview’ ad, the girls are shown to have become successful while the tagline says ‘*ab waqt hai badalne ka/now is the time to change*’.
- In the Sofy ‘*shakti*’ ad, the girl is shown to have the power to tackle the world while the tagline of the ad is ‘*hum aagey aagey, duniya peeche peeche/we lead while the rest of the world follows*’.
- In the Whisper ‘college’ ad, when the girl is shown to have defeated the boy, the tagline says ‘*kadam badhaye jaa/keep moving forward in life*’.

Menstruation is posited as a barrier to women’s lives by these ads and keeping it away from the public domain and effectively hiding is shown to being success in women’s lives. Tambrands, the American tampon brand also posited menstruation as an ‘omnipresent threat’. Houppert notes that “To keep the stakes high, the company implies that “your little secret” is safe...with it. Worry, they tell girls, because evidence of your bleeding is an omnipresent threat.” (Houppert, 1999, p. 84)

The ads are giving a solution to this ‘omnipresent threat’ of the evidence of bleeding which will then facilitate their success. That they should have the ability to transcend their bodies like men is a requisite for them to be as successful as men.

Empowerment also, then, becomes a commodity to market along with the sanitary napkin. It makes the napkin saleable because then the napkin enables the women to achieve what they would otherwise be unable to. The ads present a very simplistic and myopic view of empowerment. The power dynamics aren’t necessarily changed through the purchase of the napkin. In fact, as Jia Tolentino writes for the *New York Times*, “This version of empowerment can be actively disempowering: It’s a series of objects and experiences you can purchase while the conditions determining who can access and accumulate power stay the same.” (Tolentino, 2016)

Also, commoditizing empowerment problematizes access to empowerment. Only a certain class of people is able to access the empowerment because only they can afford it. This is evident in the higher prices of these sanitary napkins – they are virtually inaccessible for lower classes, especially for the rural masses.

More so, the advertisements stick to overarching gender roles that stand in complete opposition to the empowered figure of the woman that they are trying to project.

### **Gender Roles**

Menstruation, being tabooed and hidden, also enables a systemic oppression of women by classifying them as entities carrying shameful functions. While it becomes important when the questions of child bearing come in, it still lurks quietly inside rooms, mostly being discussed among women. Menstruation also becomes important in assigning gender roles. The bleeding woman becomes inherently weaker and menstruation has often been cited as a professional hindrance – which seems to be a primary reason why advertisements play on the empowerment trope.

The sanitary napkin advertisement promises to erase this difference of ‘weakness’ and brings the narrative of empowerment through the erasure of this difference. This continuous endeavor to erase the difference works toward making the bodies of the two genders equal. Menstruation is an essential function of the female body that marks it healthy. By portraying a necessity to hide it, the advertisements fail to acknowledge the importance of it in the female body. Incidentally, while the bodies are projected at par, the societal roles continue to remain stereotypical.

The ads construct the image of the male figure as someone who is completely away from the whole idea of menstruation and is present only to fulfil some prescribed roles. As Houppert noted in her book, children, even from a young age are taught about the body in separate

classrooms. The boys grow up knowing nothing about menstruation because it is presented as an issue private to the girls. (Houppert, 1999)

While some of these ads don't have the presence of the male figure, in the ones that do, the men are clearly demarcated from the space in which the women talk about menstruation. They are not even in the same room as the women and do not take part in the discussion.

The male figure's image in these ads is that of authority in some way or the other and they are away from the area where menstruation is talked about.

- In the Kotex 'gym' ad where girls are meditating to soft music and boys are working out to rock music, the space between the two is clearly demarcated by a glass wall between their areas of working out and meditation.
- In the Stayfree 'army' ad, the father rebukes the daughter for joining the army but also eventually changes his thinking and accepts his daughter. She goes inside for packing her bags to leave for training and her mother accompanies her but her father is not seen. But when it comes to accepting her success, her father is the first one to be there.
- In the Whisper 'dance' ad, the father is the one who gives the daughter permission to participate in the dance competition. But while she runs inside the room, the father remains sitting in the drawing room. Even though he is aware that there is some problem, he doesn't go ahead and address it.
- In the Don't Worry 'hockey' ad, the coach is the one who is giving instructions to the women players. He is puzzled by the captain's decision to not play but he remains outside while the girl runs inside followed by another girl.

This image of the male seems to be a natural one and no one questions the absence of the male in these ads or his absence from these discussions. The male is there to take the decisions and the woman is empowered only by his validation.

Even though women are being given the choice to hide menstruation and move on in life, the real decision lies with a male in a position of authority. While the women appear as each other's comrades and sympathetic partners, the male figure stays out of the realm of sympathy and stays in the public space, indicating his aloofness from the idea of menstruation.

The female too, is an ideal one. The ads not only tell women how and where to talk about menstruation, they also tell us how a woman should behave during menstruation. The advertisements also omit the fact that women have to go through a certain amount of pain during menstruation. The women in these ads are completely devoid of any cramps or stomach pain. The complete silence on the subject of pain further enforces maintaining a silence on the subject, encouraging women to keep quiet about cramps, which can turn out to be a serious medical issue, within the culture of silence.

These images maintain that hierarchy of power between the masculine and feminine even while talking about a feminine product that is supposed to emancipate the woman.

## **Conclusion**

Sanitary napkin advertisements seem to have a fairly simple message to deliver to the audience. Their product will help collecting the blood while women are menstruating and dispose it properly. The subtext used for marketing the product is telling women that these napkins will help them lead a better and successful life.

The narrative of empowerment, however, is punctured with needles of oppressive ideas that seek to reinforce the same notions that bring the need for empowerment in the first place. The choice that a woman is given to be successful in life is only available to her once she has hidden a trait of her that asserts the fact that she is a woman. Hiding menstruation is hiding an important part of her 'gendered identity.' (Woods, 2013) In her study of advertising campaigns for oral

contraceptives that reduce the number of menstrual periods to three or four cycles in a year or completely obliterate them from a woman's life, Carly S. Woods says that these advertisements promise to correct the way in which a woman's life is interrupted due to menstruation. (Woods, 2013) Similarly, Indian sanitary napkin advertisements also show how menstruation interrupts women's lives. While they don't promise complete elimination of menstruation, they do promise to effectively hide it so that the women can achieve their goals in life. The woman can achieve success in life but only after she has stuck to certain choices given to her by the society.

In all these ads, the constant theme is that of becoming successful in life, especially in areas where men excel. Not just success, women also learn to be confident – but all of this is possible when women are able to transcend their bodies like men do; which basically translates to being able to tackle menstruation. Any presence or mention of menstruation renders them incapable of tackling other problems. Woods says that these ads, claiming to help women succeed, show that it's only menstruation and not gender discrimination that bars women from success and having a good life in general. (Woods, 2013) No bodily function should be a hindrance – just like men.

The idea is also to eliminate menstruation because it is 'dirty' and hence leads to all the taboos. Mary Douglas, in her book *Purity and Danger*, writes how eliminating dirt is not a part of a hygienic process but rather a process of cleansing that leads to an environment that conforms to our idea of perfection (Douglas, 1966). A perfect environment then would be one where menstrual blood is not present or is at least not leaking out in the environment. "It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created." (Douglas, 1966, p. 4) The advertisements indulge in this exaggeration by actively trying to normalize the absence of this difference.

To sum up, the covert claim of the advertisements is that being saved from menstruation – in the sense that no one gets to know about it and you remain un-shamed – women can lead

successful lives. The success in their professional and personal lives hinges on the complete erasure of menstruation from the public discourse.

Women continue to face discrimination in various spheres of life, as described by Naomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth*. At the workplace specifically – since that is the arena highlighted by most advertisements – menstruation would feature as one of the many bullet points that enumerate the biases against women. It's erasure and the silence around it gives a false sense of empowerment and makes women unable to accept this part of their bodies as normal since it is constantly being marketed as shameful. At a time when their bodies are generally being told off for being imperfect, telling them to hide a healthy function can lead them further into the abyss of dysfunctionality, leading to more body image issues. The idea of these advertisements should be to normalize menstrual bleeding and its appearance on clothes and market the product as providing comfort without necessarily hiding the process.

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