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Interrogating Stigma: Menstrual Management and Maternal Masculinity in R. Balki's *Padman*

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ABSTRACT

Arunachalam Muruganantham, India's Menstrual Man, who started a sanitary napkin revolution by inventing a low-cost pad-making machine, has been a popular subject of recent dialogues and discourses about menstrual management in contemporary South Asia. In this article I analyze the questions of menstrual management and maternal masculinity in R. Balki's film *Padman* (2018), a cinematic representation largely inspired by Muruganantham's life. I demonstrate how the myths, taboos, and restrictions surrounding menstruation in India are radically deconstructed in the film through its emphasis on interrogating the idea of menstrual stigma and period shaming vis-à-vis popular culture. The epistemological implications of such destigmatizing representations are both profound and far-reaching even as they effectively contribute toward the widespread proliferation of grass-roots activism, menstrual counter-cultures, and third-wave feminist practices.

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On March 27, 2018, Tracy Dsouza's "Girliyapa," an online entertainment channel (on Youtube) for female-oriented content in India, released a video titled *Mom, Dadi, Aur Period* (*Mom, Grandma, and Period*) to mark the occasion of Menstrual Hygiene Day (May 28), a commemoration that was initiated by the German-based NGO WASH United in 2014 (Girliyapa, 2018).[1] The video highlighted the conflicting viewpoints of Mom and Dadi in relation to Krisha's (the principal protagonist) first menstrual period, and it garnered praise from its audiences, a noteworthy achievement that can easily be corroborated by the fact that it had almost six million views to its credit. The interest in the video underscores the increasingly palpable presence of social media and digital platforms when it comes to generating discourse about a topic that is, more often than not, considered private and most discussion about it concerns concealment (Houppert, 1999; Oxley, 1998), secrecy, exclusion, and social stigma (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). The widespread dissemination of such videos could certainly go a long way in educating the public and destigmatizing cultural practices that have long been associated with menstruation.

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[1]Female author Aditi Gupta (2014) recently published a book titled *Menstrupedia Comic: The Friendly Guide to Periods for Girls*, to promote awareness of menstrual health. For more on this, see Haynes (2018).

Social changes and attitudinal transformations regarding taboo topics, such as menstruation, can come about only if they also involve the participation of men. After all, it is only when women start speaking about the unspeakable that men can begin to develop a more sympathetic understanding of women's natural bodily processes, as opposed to nurturing the typical satirical or contemptuous perspectives. It is in this context that the figure of Arunachalam Muruganantham, India's Menstrual Man, who started a sanitary napkin revolution by inventing a low-cost pad-making machine, has become so significant. Muruganantham has been a popular subject of recent dialogues and discourses about menstrual management in contemporary South Asia. His original, innovative, and thought-provoking efforts have not only been recognized and appreciated at the national level, but have also had a transnational or a quasi-global appeal (Venema, 2014). For example, in 2014, Muruganantham was included in *Time* magazine's list of 100 Most Influential People in the World; 2 years later, he was awarded the Padma Shri (the fourth highest civilian award) by the government of India.

In this article I analyze the questions of menstrual management and maternal masculinity in R. Balki's film *Padman* (2018), a cinematic representation largely inspired by Muruganantham's life.[2] I demonstrate how Indian myths, taboos, and restrictions surrounding menstruation are radically deconstructed through a pronounced emphasis on interrogating the idea of menstrual stigma and period shaming vis-à-vis popular culture. The film also foregrounds an alternative configuration of masculinity that ultimately challenges the otherwise neat divisions that characterize gendered personality traits and the conventional definitions of a hero and a superhero. The epistemological implications of such destigmatizing representations are both profound and far-reaching even as they effectively contribute toward the desirable proliferation of grass-roots activism, menstrual counter-cultures, and third-wave feminist practices.

Hindi cinema has typically included quite a few representational euphemisms. For instance, the idea of *coitus interruptus* involved a negotiation of censorship that culminated in a stylistic technique, replete with interference and symbolism: "the camera withdraws just before a steamy love scene ensues, and the film replaces it with extra-diegetic shots of waterfalls, flowers, thunder, lightning, and tropical storms" (Gopalan, 2002, p. 21). Recently, *Shubh Mangal Saavdhan* (*Beware of Marriage*), a 2017 film that deals with the issue of erectile dysfunction, referred to the problem by showing a limp Parle G biscuit falling into a cup of tea (Rai, Sharma, Sashikanth, & Prasanna, 2017). On the contrary, Balki's film successfully managed to break the silence around a subject that is an experiential reality for around 355 million menstruating women (Ani, 2018). It narrates the story of Lakshmikant Chauhan and Gayatri, a newlywed couple residing in a small town called Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh (a large state in central India). Their marital life is ultimately put to the test when Lakshmi's obsession to provide inexpensive sanitary pads for his wife soon turns into a constant source of humiliation and embarrassment for all the female members of the family. Having lost Gayatri (she decides to go back to her natal home) and his basic sense of self-respect, Lakshmi leaves the village with a single-minded resolve to address the glaring issue of unsanitary menstrual practices. With his unwavering spirit, intuitive intelligence, and steadfast fixity of

[2]The film draws heavily from the short story "The Sanitary Man of Sacred Land" in Twinkle Khanna's (2016) book, *The Legend of Lakshmi Prasad*, which is closely based on Muruganantham's life. See Khanna (2016).

purpose, he finally succeeds in his mission and is able to re-earn the admiration and approval of his friends, family members, and acquaintances.

The idea of menstruation as social stigma is both faithfully represented and interrogated at several registers in the film. During their menstrual periods, Gayatri and her sisters-in-law are not only provisionally banished from the household, but are also considered impure. This cultural prejudice, which emanates from the diametrically opposite conceptual categories of purity and pollution, is something that Lakshmi rejects. Among Hindus, menstruation is considered polluting (Garg, Goyal, & Gupta, 2012); therefore, Lakshmi's defiant attempts to touch his wife or set foot in her allocated room every now and then can be construed as subversive gestures and resistance to his mother's repeated warnings and reservations. In other words, he audaciously manages to disrupt what Laws (1990, p. 211) termed, albeit in a different context, "menstrual etiquette." Menstrual etiquette can be broadly understood as "part of a larger etiquette of behavior between the sexes, which governs who may say what to whom, and in what context" (Laws, 1990, p. 211). The very fact that Lakshmi invites Gayatri to come inside the house to rewrite tradition and create a new ritual altogether demonstrates how his utter disregard for menstrual etiquette interrogates and subverts status distinctions. Even more important, he interrogates the stigma surrounding menstruation by gifting his sisters his own handmade sanitary pads. His unrelenting efforts to oppose and replace dirty rags with hygienic pads truly reach scandalous proportions when he is caught giving pads to Tinku (a girl from the neighborhood who had just experienced menarche) in the middle of the night. Because of his inability to distinguish between ordinary cotton and cellulose fiber, he repeatedly fails in his attempts to make an effective pad, which tests the patience of his otherwise humble and submissive wife. He therefore tries the pad on himself by attaching a balloon filled with goat blood borrowed from a friend, a revolutionary gesture that nevertheless backfires when he gets bloodstains on his trousers in public. If "menstrual stigma is perpetuated indirectly through silence" (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013, p. 12), then Lakshmi's endeavor to reduce stigma by breaking this silence unequivocally poses a palpable threat to the orthodox, conservative, and traditional moral order of the village. Based on Goffman's (1963) groundbreaking work on the various categories through which stigmas are often constructed (categories such as blemishes of character, abominations of the body, and tribal identities or social markers associated with marginalized groups), Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) pointed out that menstrual blood is a stigmatizing mark that easily fits all three of Goffman's categories. It not only marks girls and women as different from the normative, privileged male body (a point cogently illustrated by Young [2005]), but it is also considered an abomination the sight of which may serve as a blemish on a woman's character. Within an Indian context, the various kinds of taboos and exclusions to which women are subjected during their menstrual periods include an outright ban on participating in religious activities, attending functions (e.g., marriages), cooking, and sexual intercourse or touching male members of the household (Garg et al., 2012). Lakshmi's social ostracism thus indicates the kind of radical potential that his sustained engagement with menstrual management entails.

The film's preoccupation with menstrual management and menstrual stigma is an important one because in India unsanitary menstrual practices are a direct consequence

of the myths, misconceptions, and stigmas that are often associated with menstruation. For instance, it is widely believed that a used menstrual cloth (the use of rags and old clothes is a rule rather than exception in rural areas of India) possesses an evil quality; if men see the cloth, dry or otherwise, they could go blind (Garg et al., 2012). There are several other myths and stigmas that occupy a dominant position within the popular imagination. For instance, it is also believed that if a dog, snake, or a cow were to dig out buried old cloths from the earth, the woman who used them will never be able to conceive (Garg et al., 2012; Kumar, 2011). For this reason, and because of a culture of shame and embarrassment, women are forced to seek well-hidden places even in their homes to store their cloths, which we see Gayatri doing in the early sections of Balki's film. Often these places are quite dark, damp, and unhygienic, and so women and girls mostly have to use moist and damp cloths, which may contribute to serious health risks, such as reproductive tract infections, pelvic inflammatory disease, bacterial vaginosis, cervical cancer, HIV/AIDS, infertility, and ectopic pregnancy (Garg et al., 2012). In addition, a recent study has revealed that 89% of Indian women use cloth, 2% use cotton wool, 7% use sanitary pads, and 2% use ash to manage menstruation (Pallapothu, 2018). The film argues that only 12% of the 500 million women in India use pads; the issue here is not one of statistical accuracy, but rather that of the poor menstrual hygiene management in the country. Moreover, in certain slum areas of the subcontinent, menstruation is simply referred to as "dating" or "*kapda*" (cloth; Kumar, 2011, p. 597).

The correspondence between social stigma and unsanitary practices is also revealed through another incident in the movie. Lakshmi purchases an expensive pack of sanitary pads for his wife, which the latter stubbornly refuses to accept because she worries that it may severely jeopardize the family's budget. Unable to return the pack to the medical store where he bought it, he uses a pad to cover the wound of an injured worker at a workshop, much to the dismay and discomfort of his fellow employees. However, he is rightly praised by the doctor at the local health center because his ingenious decision and quick thinking preempted the common practice of using dirty cloths that otherwise could have resulted in a serious infection or even a tragic amputation of the worker's hand. Thus if Gayatri is a victim of menstrual stigma (at one point in the film, she desperately admits that "We women would rather die of illness than live with shame"; Khanna & Balki, 2018; translation mine),[3] Lakshmi epitomizes the voice of menstrual management. This is one of the most fundamental reasons why he is considered mentally ill and unstable, even by his own spouse. In that sense, the arduous and painstaking journey from *sharam* (shame) to *sammaan* (self-respect) neatly captures the close interrelationship that exists between menstrual destigmatization and sanitary menstrual practices. It is a powerful statement on the existing state of affairs vis-à-vis menstrual management in India, one that could inspire further dialogue, awareness, and sensitivity regarding such a taboo subject. This is because the integration of issues such as menstrual management into popular culture gives it exposure and allows the matter

[3]Elsewhere, she repeatedly entreats her husband not to get involved in women's issues; otherwise, she will definitely kill herself out of shame! She even feels deeply disturbed talking about her periods with Lakshmi. When she finally leaves him, she once again reiterates her opinion that for a woman, there is no bigger disease than shame itself. Moreover, even her brothers believe that unless she divorces Lakshmi, the stigma surrounding his failed experiments would continue to haunt the family's reputation.

to resonate with a wider audience (Unnikkumarath, 2018). On a related note, Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler (2013) also drew attention to the fact that the stigma of menstruation can be challenged through an analysis of menstruation in popular culture. They cited numerous examples of such work, including the artists Vanessa Tiegs and Petra Paul (both of whom have used their menstrual blood in their canvases to create beautiful, and intriguing, works of art), Harry Finley's virtual museum (in which he has collected women's stories and cultural artifacts about menstruation), Ani DiFranco's (1993) song *Blood in the Boardroom*, and Inga Muscio's (2002) book *Cunt*. *Padman* is an important addition to the hitherto existing repertoire of affirmative, enabling, and desirable representations of menstrual destigmatization and menstrual management in the larger context of global/transnational popular cultures.

The film also experiments with the idea of *maternal masculinity* as a more desirable alternative to the overarching notions of dominant/hegemonic masculinities that characterize most cultures and societies in the world (Connell, 2005, p. 37). In its basic form, masculinity refers to the "*socially produced but embodied ways of being male*. Its manifestations include manners of speech, behavior, gestures, social interaction, a division of tasks 'proper' to men and women, and an overall narrative that positions it as superior to its perceived antithesis, femininity" (Srivastava, 2015, p. 332). In the early decades of post-independence India (roughly the 1950s and the 1960s), the rational, scientific "Five-Year Plan Hero" (Srivastava, 2006, p. 141), strongly linked to economic planning, emerged as a popular, standard, and formulaic mode of delineating metropolitan masculinity, one that embodied the modernist temperament and the technological drive/spirit of Nehruvian socialism. The following decade also marked the arrival of rogue/provincial masculinities (Banerjea, 2005) as well the iconic figure of the "Angry Young Man" (Kazmi, 1998), popular character types that were subsequently supplanted by the "Psychotic Hero" (Mazumdar, 2000) of the 1990s. Scholars such as Bharucha (1995), Nandy (2001), Vasudevan (2002), Rajan (2006), Gabriel (2010), Gehlawat (2012), and Mubarki (2018) have also diligently explored the contemporary manifestations of masculinities in Hindi cinema. And yet what Balki accomplishes with the character of Lakshmikant Chauhan is to expand and enrich the domain of what Diamond (2009) has called, albeit in a different context, the dialectical tension that exists between the dichotomous (or fixed) aspects of gender experience and the more integrated experience of gender: "between gender *rigidity* and *fluidity*, and between (*core*) *gender identity* and the *gender multiplicity of the multi-gendered self*" (p. 23). Indeed, *Padman* makes room for the "mother" inside the male hero in order to foreground the positive aspects of a healthy masculine gender identity, which is something I call *maternal masculinity*. This maternal masculinity is delineated at both registers, that is, at the level of the central thematic plotline as well as in the implicit subtext of the peripheral complementary narrative.

At the very outset, the "nurturing possibilities" (Fast, 1984, p. 73) and the sensitive and caring aspects of Lakshmi's character are revealed when he is shown gifting an onion chopper to his wife because the latter was found crying while chopping onions manually. Similarly, he makes a special seat for Gayatri at the back of his bicycle to prevent any kind of discomfort that she may face while riding along with him. He even washes cloths for her and largely succeeds in revolutionizing the pad-making process because he simply cannot come to terms with the fact that his wife will continue to use

old rags for her periods. In other words, his character is "a maternal conception of manhood," one that is "defined by character, by the inner qualities of stoicism, integrity, reliability, the ability to shoulder the burdens, the willingness to put others first, the desire to protect and provide and sacrifice" (Faludi, 1999, p. 38). Faludi (1999) observed that these are the same qualities recorded as masculine "that society has long recognized in women as the essence of *motherhood*. Men were useful in so far as they mastered skills associated with the private realm of the feminine" (p. 38). This point is further reinforced in the film through the peripheral complementary narrative that involves Pari's father, Prof. Tejas Walia (Pari is a resourceful woman who helps Lakshmi reach out to the rural households and sell his pads to numerous women inhabiting such backward spaces). Tejas also consciously embodies a strong sense of maternal masculinity that closely parallels the kind of masculinity that Lakshmi enacts. Having lost his wife at a very early stage of his marital life, Tejas takes pride in the fact that he is both a mother and a father to his daughter. Viewers are even told how he once took cookery classes to introduce Pari to the different flavors of chicken. At one point in the narrative, Tejas tells Lakshmi: "Just as we can truly enjoy fatherhood only by becoming the mother, so we can only enjoy being men by keeping our feminine side alive" (Khanna & Balki, 2018; translation mine).[4] Here, maternal masculinity is plausibly posited as a more productive, agreeable, and fulfilling experience for these two male characters. It epitomizes an alternative variety of inclusive masculinity that rivals orthodox masculinities as an esteemed category of masculine archetypes (Anderson, 2009).

The idea of maternal masculinity also leads one to speculate about the kind of superhero whom Balki wants viewers to acknowledge and identify. This is because, when Lakshmi's invention wins the "Life-Changing Innovation of the Year" award, the Chief Guest who honors him openly declares: "America has Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man, but India has Padman. He is our real superhero!" (Khanna & Balki, 2018; translation mine). Here, the Indian superhero is not only distinguished from its Western counterparts on the basis of the functional differences served by the real and reel characters (a meta-commentary on Muruganantham's pioneering efforts), but is also given a unique definition even within a South Asian context. Kaur and Eqbal (2015), who have conducted analyses of Hindi-language comic books, have pointed out that "martial masculinity" (p. 378) is a staple feature of the archetypal Indian superhero. As opposed to this notion, the title song of *Padman* (which plays in the concluding scenes of the film) reveals that there is no shooting or "bang-bang," no dramatic entry, or breaking of bones insofar as this particular superhero is concerned. In keeping with the organizing principle of the film, the song communicates the fact that this superhero's story is not about choppers, sprawling mansions, spectacular jumps from high-rise buildings, cool dance moves, or even fancy dialogue. The *aam aadmi* (the common man) in Balki's film becomes a superhero because of his extraordinary innovation that simplifies the pad-making process through four smaller and cheaper machines (as opposed to a single, high-cost machine) for de-fibration/pulverization, compression, interfusion/wrap fusion,

[4]The film, however, desists from romanticizing the notion of maternal masculinity by also highlighting its limitations. For example, when Pari tells Lakshmi that only a woman can talk to other women about woman-related issues, she certainly draws attention to the irreducible component of experiential specificity that remains inaccessible even to a maternal conception of manhood.

and sterilization. Instead of commercializing his venture, he successfully creates employment and income opportunities for many women in rural India (by giving his machines to women's self-help groups [WSHGs]), which further corroborates his exceptional vision and larger-than-life altruism. This kind of groundbreaking revolution reminds viewers of the vibrant and thriving concept of *jugaad* (frugal innovation) that exists in India and offers "an uplifting, potentially emancipatory discourse of mobility in a setting where even after two decades of economic reforms, wealth gap and poverty stubbornly persist" (Kaur, 2016, p. 313). Lakshmi's "T&F" (Try and Fail) formula and his unconventional heroism clearly have a leveling/democratizing aspect. Courtney Dailey (as cited in Bobel, 2010, p. 106), one of the founders of the Bloodsisters (widely considered to be the leaders of the radical menstruation movement), rightly pointed out that showing women that they can take control of their menstruation "back from scientists and multinational corporations is very exciting, as it can lead to thinking about taking back a lot of power, as well as planting seeds of critical thinking about the world and how we live in it." The *hatke* (unconventional) superhero of Balki's film is thus a compelling illustration that nonconformist formulations of masculinity can be introduced into popular culture.

Menstrual stigma and menstrual management are two important issues related to women, which are, in a way, inversely proportional to each other. The greater the stigma in any society or culture, the less likely it is that the levels or standards of menstrual management in that society or culture will be encouraging/inspirational. In that sense, *Padman* is a significant intervention that interrogates the idea of menstrual stigma and foregrounds the necessity of menstrual management. In other words, it is an important step toward "menstrual justice" (Kissling, 2006, p. 126). The extraordinary ramifications of such popular representations of menstruation cannot be emphasized enough, particularly for a country such as India, which, up until recently, had a 12% goods and services tax (GST) on sanitary napkins (Karelia, 2018); after much resistance, protest, and opposition from across the country, this tax was finally revoked on July 21, 2018. This incident invariably reminds us of Gloria Steinem's (1978) classic and jocular essay in which she suggested that, if men could menstruate, "sanitary supplies would be federally funded and free" (p. 110). Another pertinent issue at stake here is the disconcerting fact that 23% of girls in India quit school when they start menstruating (NBC News, 2018). Thus, even though organizations such as Mukti Project and Sukhibhava have resulted in scores of village girls across India gaining access to affordable sanitary products and disposal units, a lot of work is still left to be done in this regard (Unnikkumarath, 2018). The idea of men's participation in this work, which Balki's film invokes, offers an integrated and a much more powerful approach to combat unsanitary menstrual practices. As Bobel (2010) succinctly put it, "Third-wave feminism, as expressed through radical menstrual activism, demonstrates that fixed identities, acknowledged as imperfect and limiting but politically expedient, can and should be destabilized in the interest of social justice" (p. 156). Like Muruganantham, Pravin Nikam (another social activist) is affectionately called the "Period Man" of Pune (a sprawling city in the western Indian state of Maharashtra) because of his extensive work in spreading menstrual management awareness. In addition, Delhi-based brand consultant Anish Sharma, whose radical initiative "Mission Shakti" aims to provide

recycled, low-cost, biodegradable sanitary pads to women, has earned the nickname "Delhi's Pad Man" (Arora, 2018). As menstrual spokespersons, these enterprising male activists clearly suggest "a bending, if not a breaking, of the rules of who speaks for menstruation" (Bobel, 2010, p. 157). One can only hope that efforts of the kind discussed above will inspire further contributions to menstrual activism and help to create vibrant, popular, effective, and thriving menstrual counter-cultures in which both women and men participate.

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