

Portrayal of Menstruation and Womanhood in 'Ayali' Tamil Web Series

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Abstract

The study on the “Portrayal of Menstruation and Womanhood in 'Ayali' Tamil Web Series” is a qualitative content analysis of the 2023 Tamil web series Ayali directed and produced by Muthukumar. Ayali focuses on the patriarchal characteristics of Tamil society in particular and Indian society in general. The plot centres on Tamizhselvi, a young teenage girl who rebels against the dreadful traditions and practices that had been oppressing women in Veerappannai village in Pudukkottai for 500 years in order to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor.

The eight-episode series starts with an animated segment that narrates the evolution of Veerapannai. According to traditions, the locals suffered the wrath of their deity (Ayali) after a young girl from the village of Pannaiyur eloped with a man from a nearby village. Consequently, the entire community moved to a new location in Pudukkottai district that eventually became known as Veerapannai. A temple for Ayali was constructed in the new village and girls were married as soon as they reached puberty.

Girls on reaching puberty are no longer permitted to attend school. They have to sacrifice their education and beliefs, and get married. The males of the hamlet and political leadership blindly adhere to maintaining the caste purity. The web series revolves around the struggles of Tamizhselvi against this tradition.

The study intends to analyse the series on the basis of three objectives. The prime objective is to explore the depiction of menstruation in Ayali, and the implications of this depiction on the societal attitude towards menstruation. Secondly, the researcher will analyse the portrayal of gender roles in Ayali. Thirdly, the study will analyse the socio-economic positioning of female characters in Ayali. Feminist media theory and cultivation theory will form the theoretical foundation of the study.

Keywords: *Menstruation, Puberty, Menarche, Culture, Tradition, Caste, Beliefs, Rituals*

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Introduction

Menstruation is thought to have played an important role in human evolution. Since puberty, women experience menstruation and the menstrual cycle. However, in many parts of the world, menstruation remains largely hidden from the public. In addition, many women in our society are reluctant to even acknowledge that they are menstruating. Myths about menstruation are still a barrier to social progress, even in the digital age. In our country, which is known for having the largest population in the world, there are still girls who have to stay out of their homes during their periods.

On November 16, 2018, in Tamil Nadu a 14-year-old rural girl passed away when Cyclone Gaja struck her “period hut”; she had been made to sleep alone while she was bleeding. She was trapped inside the hut by a fallen coconut tree, making it hard for her parents to save her.

She was stranded in the hut on November 16 when the cyclone struck, her family reported to BBC Tamil. Considering that it was customary to separate menstruation females from other girls, some locals called this a "wake up call". In many rural areas of India, menstruation is a social taboo. It is customary to view women as impure when they are menstruating. (BBC News, 2018)

As soon as a girl enters menarche, different instructions are imposed on her, even though she is pampered by her parents and other family members at home. She is subjected to a constant barrage of warnings, ranging from "don't talk to them," "don't walk like that," "don't sit like that," "don't eat that," and so on.

The monthly shedding of the uterine lining is known as menstruation. Menses, menstrual period, menstrual cycle, and period are the other names for menstruation. Menstrual blood passes through your cervix and exits your body through your vagina. It is a mixture of blood and tissue from within your uterus. Hormones in our bodies cause menstruation. Our bodies use hormones as chemical messengers. The ovaries, which are a component of our reproductive system, and the pituitary gland, which is located in our brain, both produce and release specific hormones at different points during the menstrual cycle.

The lining of our uterus thickens as a result of these hormones. This takes place in order for an egg to implant into our uterine lining in the event of a pregnancy. Our ovaries release an egg due to hormones as well (ovulation). The fallopian tubes are where the egg travels through while it waits for sperm. When sperm cannot fertilise an egg and cause pregnancy to occur, the uterine lining then degrades and sheds. This biological process is known as the "period" (clevelandclinic.org, 2022).

Previous Research

Hindi cinema has portrayed women as a category that can't possibly imagine a real life. Bollywood filmmakers portrayed them without knowing their bodily changes like sexual desire, menarche, menopause, ageing, pregnancy etc. Hindi cinema has created a cultural imagination that depicts menstrual blood as an alien thing, like offal, cadavers and bodily waste. In *Gaze Averted: Interrogating the Portrayal of Menstruation in Hindi Cinema* by Yadav and Gaur (2023), they discuss the two critically acclaimed films: the 2018 film *Padman*, directed by R. Balki, and the 2019 Oscar-winning documentary *Period. End of Sentence*, directed by Rayka Zehtabchi. In these films, women's reproductive health and debates about shame, the power of economic independence and patriarchy are explored. (Yadav & Gaur, 2023).

In *The Good, the Bad, and the Bloody: Images of Menstruation in Television and in Menstrual Activism*, Tripp (2021) explores how it is important for campaigners to keep in mind that everyone should be included when talking about menstrual health. To reiterate, not all people who menstruate are female, nor do all women menstruate. The lives and experiences of people who do not identify as cis-women are being erased when we only refer to menstruators as women and girls. The movement is more inclusive and representational of the menstrual community when inclusive language is used, such as "menstruators" or "menstruating bodies." Without taking into account the experiences of all menstruators, particularly those from underrepresented populations, menstrual activism cannot hope to fulfil its mission of normalising menstruation. By having the conversation, individuals will feel more comfortable asking questions and gaining a complete understanding of all parts of menstruation—the good, the bad, and the bloody. It is far too common for people who menstruate to be unaware of the changes their bodies undergo at menarche (Tripp, 2021).

The discourse of historical approach is used in the paper *You're a woman now: Depiction of first menstruation in movies and TV series* by Anna Matreveli to compare how menarche has been portrayed on TV over the years and to examine the intergenerational experience of menarche. She came to the conclusion that menarche is no longer portrayed on TV as a shameful taboo but rather as a strong visual narrative device. Nonetheless, the menarche scenarios remained mostly unchanged, strongly depending on a mother-daughter bonding storyline and emphasising childbearing as the primary and perhaps the only benefit of menstruation. The conversation on television is still dominated by the constant use of menstrual euphemisms (Matreveli, 2023).

Methodology

In order to achieve the study's goal, the researcher used a qualitative research methodology. Aiming to collect and evaluate non-numerical (descriptive) data, qualitative research seeks to comprehend people's attitudes, beliefs, and motivations in order to better grasp their social reality.

Muthukumar is the director and producer of the *Ayali* Tamil web series, which focuses on the patriarchal aspects of Indian society in general and Tamil society in specific. In order to fulfil her dream of becoming a doctor, Tamizhselvi, a young teenage girl who battles against the horrible customs and traditions that have been oppressing women in the Veerappannai the village in Pudukkottai for 500 years. The researcher examines how *Ayali* depicts menstruation and how this affects social attitudes towards menstruation. Feminist Media theory and cultivation theory form the theoretical foundation of the study.

Objectives of the Study

- To explore the depiction of menstruation in *Ayali*, and the implications of this depiction on societal attitude towards menstruation.
- To analyse the portrayal of gender roles in *Ayali*.
- To analyse the socio-economic positioning of female characters in *Ayali*.

Analysis and Findings

The web series *Ayali*, both produced and directed by Muthukumar, was released in 2023. The protagonist of the tale, Tamilselvi, along with her parents and fellow students, make the major cast. A flashback that is shown as animation opens the story. The 14th century is when the goddess *Ayali*'s narrative starts. *Ayali* is the name of a clean deity who lives in the Tamil village of Panaiyur. Since the goddess is regarded as a virgin, men are not permitted on the land she owns. The shrine is exclusively open to women. If they are in their periods, they are also forbidden from touching the goddess. You can only touch the goddess and offer prayers close to her if you are a non-menstruating girl.

A man who lived close to the village once came there to collect honey. One drop of honey dripped on a woman under the tree as the man was gathering honey from it. She attracts the man's attention, and they end up falling in love. However, they were not supported by their caste, so they left the village. The village of Panaiyur experienced numerous issues following the couple's elopement, including fields

turning to ashes and fish in the river dying. Cows perished as well. An illness similar to chicken pox swept through the entire community.

All the villagers got chicken pox, and they thought that the goddess' wrath was due to the girl who had run away. The villagers decided to depart from that location as a result. Although they travel to many different regions, the villagers still don't get well. At last, they arrive in Veerapannai, which is located in Pudukottai and they construct Ayali's temple.

The goddess's wrath lessened, and she gave permission for mankind to reside there. The people made a vow that girls will get married as soon as they reach adolescence. The girls made a commitment to uphold that custom at all costs. The Veerapannai villagers haven't altered their customs in 500 years. Because of the fear, no one investigates or dares to question their systems. This marked the conclusion of the flashback story and the beginning of the actual story, which is set in the 1990s.

It is their belief that a menstruating girl entering the temple is not good for the future. They also restricted boys from entering the temple. The goddess Ayali "gets angry" with them if they allow a menstruating woman into the former's place.

They believe that menstruation is dirty. Because the temple is such a pure thing, the people do not want menstruating women to enter it and contaminate it. The only thing that allows the villagers to procreate for the following generation is menstruation. The only reason they receive attention from society is because they wish to increase their numbers. They never consider the deteriorating health of teenagers who get pregnant.

The primary character, Tamilselvi, is a passionate girl who is eager to do well in school. Kuruvammal is her mother, and Thavasi is her father. One day, when in the eighth grade, she realises that she wants to be a doctor.

Tamilselvi once asked her mother, "Did you cry on the wedding day?" The mother retorted that she had wept all night and disclosed another fact: the girls from the villages married as soon as they reached menarche, thus they were unable to continue their education. Following marriage, the spouse becomes their entire universe and their everything. After puberty, they have to support their family because they can no longer spend their time studying, playing games, or hanging out with friends. It is necessary since the groom's family looks for a girl who is well-versed in handling everyday life and household chores.

Since none of the community's boys passed the tenth public exam, there are no male doctors. Additionally, as girls enter puberty, they stop teaching them. After menarche, girls are not permitted to continue their education in their system or culture. That being the case, the community does not produce any female doctors. Everyone claims that the goddess does not wish the girls to study, and they have a deep belief in the cultural rites that are centred around the former.

Tamilselvi learned about menstruation from her senior's (Mythili) menarche function. She was given false information that girls go through puberty when they sleep at night. However, Tamilselvi's mother told her that menarche can occur at any moment. There is no set age at which puberty occurs. She therefore advises her daughter to keep her puberty a secret from everyone. She also needs to notify her mother first. As she approaches menarche, she prefers to look down and tell her mother that she is now a woman rather than looking at her father or any other relative.

Tamilselvi is aware, first of all, that females receive any food item and clothes they desire during their menarche. However, their circumstances deteriorated after that. The females are required to stay in their home after they reach puberty and perform all household chores, including cleaning the house, cow manure, gathering firewood from the forest, fetching water from the well, and so forth. Living as a woman is incredibly difficult. They got married as soon as they reached puberty, and a year later they gave birth to a child. Girls face numerous pregnancy-related issues, such as early abortion and malnourishment.

After acknowledging the problems surrounding her village, Tamilselvi enters the Ayali temple. She prays that she should not have periods. She wants to study well and become a doctor. If she enters puberty, she thinks that Ayali will no longer be a goddess to her.

Tamil Selvi and her friends were playing at school one day. She was playing with great joy when suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her stomach which made her flee from the playground without telling her friends. She sat on the ground. Because of the severe stomach pain, she started sweating and her hands were shaking. She sat there for a while, doubting herself. She noticed blood when she looked down at her legs. She had started menstruating. The actual colour of the blood is shown in the scene.

She thinks about what would happen if she told her parents about her menstruation. If she tells her parents, they will celebrate her menarche and after that she will have to do a lot of household work. She has to make food for the cow, go to the forest to collect firewood for cooking. She also has to fetch water from the deep well. When

she walks to class, the blood that drips through her legs is shown. And also, there are blood stains in her white shirt and blue coloured middy. Her math master called her into the office room. The sir is a very small man, so he can't reach the ink that is placed on the almirah. So, he asked Tamil to fetch it. She got scared and the ink bottle fell and broke. The red ink spread all over her body. The teacher teased her but the headmistress came and made her calm down. The headmistress told her that it was only ink, that she need not worry. She allowed her to go to the house. Suddenly she realised that no one noticed that she was menstruating. She is very happy and goes to her house. The villagers noticed her clothes and asked her what happened to her, she told them that it was just ink that fell on her body. The entire community was staring at her as if she were someone strange. Tamil enjoys the situation because she has escaped from the 'big problem'.

Her mother asked her what had happened when she came home. She repeated that it was just ink. Her mother told her that she was scared. She had trouble falling asleep at night, unlike other days. She was anxious. Looking at herself in the mirror, she reassured herself that her physical appearance had not changed. This is why she believed she had kept her menarche a secret from everyone. She decided to keep the secret from her parents and the community as a whole.

Unfortunately for her, the next menstrual period came. Tamil came home from school and was talking to her neighbours. Suddenly she got cramps. She ran to a nearby pond. After a few minutes she went back to her house. But she was afraid. If her mother comes to know about her period, it would be very difficult for her to study further. When she returned home, her mother had decorated the house with mango and coconut leaves. At first, she thought her mother had found out her secret. She thought her studies ended here. But her mother said that it was Vaikasi Pournami, the rituals in the house are because of that. She assumed that everyone knew about her menstruation, that's why they decorated the house for her menarche celebration. Once again, she escaped the situation. After reaching Ayali temple she was confused whether to enter the temple or not. In the temple there is a woman who is not menstruating and so she is the only one in the village who helps the non-menstruating girls and teaches them how to pray or behave inside the temple.

This woman also made up stories that two girls once entered the Ayali temple on the days of their menstruation. Apparently, those girls died from vomiting blood. It is a curse of Ayali. Tamil Selvi heard this story and was afraid to enter the temple. But her mother and the lady inside the temple tried to take her inside without knowing that she was menstruating. When she entered the temple, she had no changes. She felt nothing.

If a menstruating woman entered the premises of the deity, it was believed that she would get sick. If she does not get sick, she will not survive the Amavasi day. She will vomit the blood and die before Amavasi. Tamilselvi had doubts that she would survive the Amavasi. She thought that Ayali was angry at her and that she would kill her. But nothing happened. The next day of the Amavasi, she realised that there is no problem entering the Ayali temple during menstrual days.

That day she went to the Ayali temple to thank the goddess for helping her. But her mother discovered the clothes that were used as sanitary pads in her bag. Tamil Selvi got the idea of using the clothes to collect menstrual blood from her mother and other women whom she knew. Her mother Kuruvammal tries to share the news but Tamil Selvi restricts her. She says she wants to study. Tamil Selvi told her mother that if the locals knew that she was menstruating, they ought to be informed that it was her first time.

Mother Kuruvammal agrees to her daughter's wishes and tries to perform a small menarche procedure. The menstruating girl should eat raw egg. In Kerala, the same rituals are performed even today. The consumption of raw eggs with gingelly oil and turmeric powder is an essential part of the procedure.

In the series, the sanitary towels were dried in the sun along with other clothes. But the father said that they should be dried in some other place; not in a public place where everyone can see. The sanitary napkin is never touched by any other person, even a woman in that house. In Kerala and in most parts of the country, women experience the same restrictions. They dry the clothes in a closed area away from the sight of men. And also, old clothes are used for collecting the menstrual blood. White clothes are avoided to prevent visibility of the menstrual blood.

At first, there were six 9th standard girls in the classroom. After a few days or months, there is only one girl student. Other girls dropped out after their menarche. When Tamil Selvi reaches 10th standard, she is the only girl child who represents the 10th standard girls in the morning assembly.

There are rumours among the villagers about Tamil Selvi. She is studying in the 10th standard now, her girlfriends have got their periods and she has not even got her menarche. So, the villagers assumed that the reason she does not get periods is something wrong her parents did in their lifetime. Also, her father's co-workers bullied him and made fun of him that he will never be a grandfather as his daughter does not menstruate and that he will always stay young. It was very difficult for Tamil Selvi to be a woman who “did not menstruate” even at this age.

One day the father asked the mother whether their daughter was in a good state of health or not as the man was worried for Tamil not menstruating. The situation was tough as only his daughter and the lady in the temple were the only ones who were not menstruating.

Tamil Selvi appeared for the SSLC exam and passed with high marks. When the lady inside the temple got a spiritual power, she said that every single woman should enter the Ayali temple because Ayali told her so. So, all the women of the village waited for the *Pournami* day to enter the temple. But the chauvinist men of the village burnt fields and killed animals and said that Ayali was angry and hence women should not enter the temple. It was then that Tamil Selvi revealed the truth that she had been menstruating for two years. Her father in shock beat her in front of the villagers. They soon fixed the marriage of Tamil Selvi and Sakthivel as she revealed that she was menstruating. Based on their rituals, when a girl reaches puberty, she should get married.

As they arranged the marriage of Tamil Selvi, she tried to run away from the village with the help of other women. But she soon realised that she never wanted to leave the place. She had to live there, only then the villagers would know about the power of education and only then would they allow girls to enter the temple.

Gender roles in Ayali

The gender roles are very well designed. The characters do justice to the period of the 1990s. At that time the society is shown to follow a male patriarchal system. Women listen to their husbands without having a voice of their own. They only had discussions about their problems in their kitchen or in their women's groups. Most men affirmatively believed in their culture and rituals.

The majority of males also think that their community, Veerapannai Makkal Nala Sangam, exists. The community has no name at all. It is a part of the larger society that suppresses women's rights and higher education.

The community association has no female candidates in this series. Most of the men went to town for the association meetings, otherwise they just lived in the village. It demonstrates that women enjoy neither equality nor respect. During community meetings, there is no female presence on stage or among the audience. They think that women should solely live at home. They should cook delicious food, provide excellent care for themselves and their kids, clean their homes, gather wood for fire, tend to the cows, and so on.

In the series they show the existence of the dowry system. In the first community meeting, Sakthi Vel, the Villain character, tries to help a poor man for his daughter's wedding. Prior to that, the father of Tamilselvi had begged everyone present at the event to marry off the daughter of that impoverished guy without giving her a single dime in dowry. But nobody accepts. Then Sakthi Vel entered and gave his gold chain as a donation. Then he asked his dad if he had anything more to donate. The father gave a gold ring. Sakthi Vel gave this gold to the maths teacher and asked him to collect all the money from the people attending the function. The incident strongly indicates that there is a dowry system and they marry off a girl by giving a huge amount of money or gold.

There is only one character that lives inside the temple in this series, and there is no representation of queer people at all. The reason she resides at the temple is that she is not menstruating. Once, the young boy who plays with Tamil Selvi inquired if he could go inside the temple. Which god forbids boys from entering the temple and which god forbids touching them. Majority of the male characters portray themselves as cultural protectors.

The community exclusively supports male students seeking higher education. The females are able to attend school prior to the onset of menstruation. Their schooling ends when they get their periods. It is not the elders' concern whether they are diligent students. However, no boy has been able to pass the tenth exam before the protagonist did. The only person who passed the tenth-grade exam was Tamil Selvi, and four other boys passed the exam with her help.

Almost all of the female characters are simply restricted to their homes and household chores. They pay attention to what their mother-in-law, spouse, and mother speak.

Socio-economic positioning of female characters

It is evident that many of the female characters in the series lack formal education. They discontinue their education due to menstruation. Kuruvammal once said that her lack of knowledge of English caused her to quit her schooling in the fifth grade. The Science teacher's wife only studied till eighth grade. . Mythily, the senior of Tamil Selvi, dropped out of school when in the ninth grade. Every female student drops out of school due to menstrual issues. Studying is not possible after menstruation. Thus, the women are unemployed. They only perform household chores like cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the spouse, kids, and parents. They don't work at any paid jobs.

They put a lot of effort into providing for their family and their home. They allot their girl children a lot of hard work because they think that if she does everything, she will become very strong and will be able to handle any challenge. This will also help the girls to accept all the odds in their lives. Menstruating women are not permitted to enter the temple by the community, nor are they permitted to go to the town. The culture there would be malignant if they went. Thus, from the fourteenth century, men have always had the upper hand over these women.

Mother Kuruvammal and daughter Tamil Selvi have a close friendship. When Kuruvammal married Thavasi at the age of 14, she was mistreated by society and did not become pregnant. Thavasi was advised by his relatives to remarry, but he refuses. Kuruvammal prays to Ayali for a child. At the age of 21, she gave birth to Tamil Selvi. Thus, Kuruvammal thinks that Ayali revered her. As a result, she treated Tamil more like a friend than a daughter. For this reason, she chose to keep Tamil's menstruation a secret. She was aware of the way her society treated women. She keeps the secret from the public because she is so proud of her daughter. Kuruvammal believes Tamil's words that she wants to become a doctor. Tamil's commitment to her studies is a source of great confidence for the mother.

Mythili's mother is Easwari. In this story, they portray very critical roles. Easwari abides by the opinions of others. Her daughter Mythili is often teased by her. Her angry face is first seen by the audience. However, Easwari admits in the midst that she is not angry with her daughter and that she acts so in order to save her daughter. Easwari was tortured by his mother-in-law and husband. She then promised to educate her daughter to take care of the household, clean its surroundings, and other chores. However, Mythili endured a great deal of suffering. Being a student is quite simple; being a wife or a bride is quite difficult. She is a talented student as well, but society has stopped her from getting educated.

She realised that marriage is not a wonderful thing after entering into wedlock. Both mentally and physically, it tormented her. She was battered daily by her inebriated spouse, which made her depressed about her marriage. She had one child in her womb and one in her hand when her husband passed away from alcohol addiction. She had big plans for her schooling but was left with a miserable marriage. Her husband and her in-laws' family never gave her any respect.

Kayalvizhi is the girl who dropped out of school in the ninth grade. She's a typical student. The majority of them think she is mediocre and uninterested in learning. Tamil people also misunderstand her. However, she acknowledges to Tamil that she is a mediocre student in the class who only receives passing grades on tests. Still, she enjoys studying and going to school. Selvi, Kayal's mother, reconciled with her

sister's husband. Kayal's sister is not giving birth, therefore her family decided to label her a "Sakarathi," which means co wife. She elopes and stays at the temple on the day of the wedding. Selvi's predicament is so pitiful that her girls' lives are getting worse.

In her husband's home, Kayal's sister is voiceless. She never expresses disagreement with her spouse. Her spouse intends to remarry other women because she is unable to bear a child. When Kayal elopes on her wedding day, her sister's husband yells at her parents, telling them she'll elope with any man. After a disagreement with her son-in-law, Selvi informs him that Kayal would never elope with a man. She may commit suicide for marrying the man. Today, most girls face a situation where the family never asks their permission to marry a man. The patriarchal system does not want to hear a word from the woman's side. These women have no voice, no job, no salary and don't even have the freedom to be independent.

Conclusion

According to the research study, menstruation is portrayed in society as a private topic, yet it must be discussed. It is high time to lift the taboo and misconceptions around menstruation, and to eradicate them from our society. Menstruation is no longer something to be hidden. It is crucial to educate a girl child so that she grows up to become a societal teacher with the support of her family. She will instil in her kids a respect for other people. Thus, educating a girl is really important.

Savitri, the headmistress in the series, always supported girls' education. As she knew Mythili so well and as she had assured the girl's family that she will have a bright life if they let her pursue her education, she attempted to call off the wedding. Most people believe that going through a menstrual period is unclean exercise, and that going into a temple during those days is risky, and that the deity will become enraged with them. This series contends that there is no logic or scientific evidence to support the myths surrounding menstruation.

In short, the series affirms that women should be well educated and financially independent. People should be able to distinguish between science and myth.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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