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## Chapter 3

## A necessary and surprising demystifying of menstruation

'I think women are foolish to pretend they are equal to men. They are far superior and always have been. Whatever you give a woman, she will make greater. If you give her sperm, she'll give you a baby. If you give her a house, she'll give you a home... If you give her a smile, she'll give you her heart. She multiplies and enlarges what is given to her.'

William Golding

that, over the years, attracted many superstitions, beliefs and alienating practices in the culture of many societies. In some primitive communities, it was considered that men's fear and repulsion towards menstrual blood was even more powerful than the fear of death. Anthropological studies have shown that there have been many measures taken by men in order to protect themselves from this mysterious substance, even to the detriment of their comfort and schedule; later on, the unfortunate manifestation of female menstruation was going to also affect hunting, which was the main means of primitive man to procure food. Since women could do nothing to stop this discharge of their blood all that was left to do was to bear the burden of separation and rejection by the community.

In many cultures, a woman who is menstruating is considered to emanate a supernatural substance, mana. The taboos regarding menstruation were in fact meant to protect others, especially men, from such a dangerous influence and to stop the woman from succumbing to this, so considered, mortal power. This is why the taboos on menstruation are, in many traditions, so hard to overcome. To this day, women are still 'enjoying' such problematic privileges in many areas, which seem to occur from the ambivalence of a tremendous inner archetypal power of the woman, which has always been hard to accept

In accord with many other psycho-analysts who dedicated themselves to this subject, Freud concluded that the attitude of men towards menstruation is caused by the 'unconscious attraction that women have towards men in that period'. Since the woman is unapproachable during menstruation, for some, she is intangible, powerful, and sacred, while for others she's impure, and tainted. It appears that, in time, menstruation and child birth were the reasons why men envied women's power, and thus wished for gender equality.

Menstruation used to be one added reason for women to be regarded as witches. Some of the most twisted superstitions would induce the belief that menstrual blood had such a power that it could cause vomiting in men, affect their vital fluids, blacken their skin, darken their spirit and gradually cause him to decay and die.

There are also some traditions where the power of this blood was recognised for its virtues; it was known that menstrual blood healed leprosy, warts, birthmarks, gout, worms, haemorrhoids and headaches. In the hermetic tradition of alchemy, menstrual blood is a privileged compound, used as an ingredient of miraculous substances. Some of the elements used to create the philosopher's stone were left to macerate in menstrual blood in order to amplify their potency.

The first bandage with menstrual blood that a virgin wore was used as a cure for the plague. The same substance was used for charms of love, could banish demons and in some ceremonies it was consecrated as an offering for the gods. According to the references of David Gordon White, there are still, to this day, some traditional ceremonies in Kerala that involve examining the first blood stains of a young girl, in order to predict her future (see David Gordon White, 'Kiss of the Yogini'). Also, the menarche (first menstruation) was considered to be a second birth because it brought with it the power to give life, to procreate. In these communities, blood is considered to be a living fluid, through which family relations and relationship possibilities could be traced, together with the stars of destiny, this is why the blood from the menarche was used as an astrological tool.

In most primitive societies, menstruating women were isolated and left to practice certain purification techniques. This is how groups of women who were keepers of traditions were formed, and thus, the culture of the community was kept and passed on to future generations. During their menstruating days, they weren't allowed to cook, plant seeds, harvest crops, or be around their husbands. Men considering that women were dangerous to their hunting and harvest represented an amazing contradiction, since in mythology, women were connected to fertility. Women were the ones

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 ${\mathcal A}$  necessary and surprising demystification ...



## In love with God

fertility rituals of the goddess Demeter and the god Dionysus.

Their success in agricultural labour was obviously related to their fertility and their ability to bear children, ability given to them by Mother Nature.

The roman physician Pliny considered that, when coming in contact with menstrual blood, wine will go sour, wheat crops will go barren, trees will no longer give fruit, steel or ivory blades will lose their sharpness, bee hives will die and even bronze and iron will rust, all these while a disgusting scent will fill the air.

In Christianity, while menstruating, women also had to endure this discriminating regime. Christian tradition considers, to this day, that women are not allowed to enter the church when menstruating, since they are considered 'unclean'. This well-known interdiction is based on the idea that the irresistible, fascinating emanation of the woman could seduce the priests and cause them to lose their heads. The official stand of the Catholic Church was that this is nature given and the woman is not guilty of it. Therefore, Pope Gregory I-st said that women should still be accepted in the church during that ingrate time of the month, because 'the women's monthly curse is not their fault, it is caused by Nature'.

The memories of these beliefs still linger on in modern times: at the beginning of the twentieth century, no woman was allowed to work in the opium industry, because it was believed that opium turned bitter in the presence of a woman on her period. To this day, farmers in Spain, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands still keep the superstition according to which the flowers and fruits of trees wilt when coming in contact with a menstruating woman. In the Jewish tradition, it has always been forbidden for women to plant seeds.

Musicians still blame their wives' periods for incidents in which the chords of their violins or harps break. And one of the most common superstitions of men, that of not walking under a bridge or a ladder is based on the fear of menstrual blood dripping on their heads, in case a woman happened to be there.

The ambivalence of feminine nature comes from the fact that the power to create is also the power to destroy; in other words, what makes the world grow can also destroy it. Menstrual blood is the outer mark of this duality, considered, in some cases, a weapon that is capable of annihilating the whole of society. Women who were menstruating would go through a time in which they would cease their daily activities. They were much more sensitive and receptive. They were much more open to psychic phenomena, more intuitive, which allowed them to gather information from the cosmic spheres of energy, information which could then be used in the physical world. This is why they

were considered wise, sages, even witches.