

**Beyond the Red World: Exploring Menstrual Experiences and Body  
Autonomy in Aida Salazar's *The Moon Within***

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**Abstract:**

Adolescence is one of the most crucial stages that human beings encounter in their lives. A phase that's integral to the transition from childhood to adulthood, whereby people struggle to fit into societal expectations and find themselves in a challenging spot as they also witness physical changes that can have a lasting impact on their mental health. This budding stage in the life of girls is complex and multilayered, and the experiences undergone by them influence their physical and emotional well-being. They have their first experience with menstruation, a word that's been unknown to them so far, as it is prohibited for an open discussion in several households, they acknowledge that their body is changing, their chest is widening, and they slowly begin to accept the bitter truth that their monthly visitor is not a pleasant one. This paper critically analyses the initial period experiences encountered by Celestina Rivera, an eleven-year-old girl, and the cultural rituals associated with navigating this profound phase, exploring her womanhood in Aida Salazar's *The Moon Within*.

**Keywords:** Adolescence, Menstruation, Womanhood, Cultural Rituals, Body Changes.

## **Introduction**

Menstruation is a profound bodily event that occurs in a woman's life, which symbolises the transition from childhood to womanhood. Menstruation, also known as periods, is biologically explained as the shedding of the uterus lining, which occurs in women of reproductive age, indicating the attainment of womanhood. Women experience various physical and mental inconveniences during the cycle and view it as an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Menstruation is as old as the human race itself. For many feminist historians and anthropologists, the first woman's evolution from oestrus to monthly menstruation was a crucial moment for the human race as it ensured its survival without becoming extinct. Dr. Shanmuga Priya. M in her article *The Moon Cycle: A Critical Menstrual Studies Perspective of Select Novels* mentions, "For feminist historian Rosalind Miles, this evolution gave the human race 60% more chances of reproduction than the higher primates. In her book *The Women's History of the World* (1988) and its updated reprint in the US, *Who Cooked the Last Supper? The Women's History of the World* (2001), she argues that menstruation, not hunting, was the greatest evolutionary leap forward for the human race" (508).

Beyond the personal inconveniences, society has aggravated the situation by imposing several restrictions, with various cultural myths and taboos floating in the air. Suneela Garg and Tanu Anand, in the article *Menstruation related myths in India: strategies for combating it* state "Many girls and women are subject to restrictions in their daily lives simply because they are menstruating. Not entering the "puja" room is the major restriction among urban girls, whereas not entering the kitchen is the main restriction among rural girls during menstruation" (184). The underlying basis for this myth is also the cultural beliefs of impurity associated with menstruation. Kathryn M. Lese, in her work *Padded assumptions: A critical discourse analysis of patriarchal menstruation discourse*, writes, "In 2015, Rupri Kaur's photography project featuring a menstruating woman was censored on Instagram, a photo-sharing social media platform. The menstruation censorship created a surge in public media discourse about what is and is not appropriate to discuss about menstruation."

Literature has explored this theme through the phenomenal works of Kamala Das, Sara Joseph, Shashi Deshpande, Doris Lessing, Farah Ahamed, Anne Sexton, and many other writers, refusing to shy away from illuminating these concerns, as it provided a strong platform to women to publicly express their inconveniences rather than concealing them within themselves. The primary source used for analysis is *The Moon Within* (2019) by Aida Salazar. In the novel, Aida Salazar weaves the tale of, Eleven-year-old Celestina Rivera (Celi), a mixed black–Puerto Rican–Mexican who

dreads the imminent arrival of her period, less because of the menstruation itself and more because her mother insists that Celi have a “moon ceremony,” in which the members of her mother’s “women’s circle” will witness the transition from childhood to womanhood. Aida Salazar is an award-winning author and arts activist whose writings for adults and children explore issues of identity and social justice. She is the author of the middle-grade verse novels *The Moon Within* (International Latino Book Award Winner), *Land of the Cranes* (Americas Award Winner), the picture book anthology, *In the Spirit of a Dream*, and the picture book biography, *Jovita Wore Pants: The Story of a Mexican Freedom Fighter*. Her short story *By the Light of the Moon* was adapted into a ballet production by the Sonoma Conservatory of Dance and is the first Xicana-themed ballet in history.

### **The Inevitable Transition:**

*The Moon Within* is a novel in verse that exudes a breath of fresh air, shedding light on topics revolving around early menstruation, self-discovery, carving one’s own identity, and navigating the deep-rooted cultural rituals, striking a chord with every adolescent girl. The story revolves around Celi Rivera, an 11-year-old girl growing up in Oakland, who is mortified that her mother wants to celebrate her first period with a moon ceremony. The world around her is changing swiftly, and so is her body as the arrival of her first period is around the corner, making Celi uncomfortable as she prefers to keep it under wraps from the public. Most of the young girls find themselves in deep confusion about expressing their bodily concerns around menstruation, as it is not considered a healthy topic of discussion in families, subjecting them to an unwelcoming experience. According to the article *The Impact of Period Shame on Girls’ Mental Health*, “In India, menstruation remains a taboo subject, surrounded by silence, myths, and discomfort. For millions of girls, this silence leads to feelings of shame, fear, and confusion. Instead of receiving support during this natural and most important stage, they face restrictions, judgment, and isolation. This is what we call period shame, and its effects extend well beyond the physical; it can severely impact a girl’s mental health, self-esteem, and sense of identity”.

Questions that Mima  
knows how to answer  
but I’m too embarrassed to ask her  
because they might  
seem stupid or gross or wrong.  
Like, why have my armpits begun to smell?  
Or how big will my breasts grow?

Or when exactly will my period come? (Salazar 9-16)

The growing anxiety that consumes Celi's mind is emphasized along with the embarrassment she feels in having an open conversation with her mother about her first period and changing body. She fears that her questions might appear stupid or wrong, highlighting her innocence and lack of knowledge on adolescence and reproductive health. These lines powerfully raise the silence that the girls are subjected to in understanding their bodies. They find it difficult to approach their period cycle with an optimistic and welcoming nature and instead find themselves in a whirlpool of questions and doubts, intensifying their fear and mental agony. Additionally, the imbalanced relationship between the mother and daughter is also presented. Mothers are meant to carve a friendly and comfortable path for their daughters, especially in their adolescent phase. Still, a lack of open conversations and discussions has made things difficult for Celi.

#### **The Ingrained Cultural Elements:**

Various traditional norms and myths are floating in the air about menstruation, and people belonging to different cultural backgrounds follow diverse cultural rituals that symbolize the birth of womanhood. Preeti Singh, in the article *Menstruation in Indian Culture: Sacred Perspectives and Rituals* states, "In some parts of India, menarche, the onset of menstruation, is celebrated with ceremonies like *Ritushuddhi*, where the girl is welcomed into womanhood. These rituals signify the transition from childhood to adulthood and are marked with blessings and festivities." There are other stringent customs that women go through during menstruation. Some parts of Nepal perform a long-standing tradition, *Chhaupadi*, whereby a menstruating woman is required to stay in a small hut or shed, external to the family home, for the duration of her menstrual cycle. According to Hindu mythology, the practice is observed as menstrual blood is believed to be impure and harmful to others (Coulthard)

Similarly, another significant event that propels the narrative forward is the moon ceremony that's conducted by Celi's mother to commemorate her attainment of womanhood. Amelia, Celi's mother, prepares her daughter for the ceremony. The moon ceremony that her mother wants to have is an ancestral Mexican ritual. "It will come every twenty- nine days /just like the moon. /So it's a moon cycle" (Salazar 103-105). In an interview with Lulu Garcia-Navarro, Salazar explains the importance of the moon ceremony as follows: "Moon ceremonies date back to pre-colonial times. Women across the Americas would gather to celebrate their bodies and their connection to the universe. It really, really moved me profoundly. ... Colonization eradicated all of our written documentation in the Americas, and we have very few fragments of knowledge. ... All of our traditions have been passed down through word

of mouth and also interpreted — which is a really powerful way to retain story on its own — but to have written documentation that women have been honoring the moon and celebrating their bodies, and their transitions, their milestones, in this way was such a blessing” (Garcia-Navarro).

I dread the ceremony where she will gather  
all six of my aunts  
some of my dance teachers  
a constellation of grown-up women  
to talk to me  
about what it means to bleed monthly  
and worse, I'll have to openly share  
my body's secret (Salazar 108-115)

It is essential to note the contradictory views of Amelia and Celi on the moon ceremony. Amelia makes it clear that she will not let her enter womanhood in doubt and shame and that she will be surrounded by strong women in their community, as she does not wish Celi to undergo the situation that Amelia underwent in her childhood. While these rituals intend to celebrate the growth and development of women, Celi couldn't restrict the moments of fear and embarrassment. The presence of so many women has amplified her existing uneasiness and struggles to accept the normalcy surrounding it. This gives her an intimidating experience rather than a comforting one. The lines “I'll have to openly share my body's secret” question her body autonomy, as she finds it impossible to preserve her bodily rights and expects to obey the societal demands that her body is subjected to, making it difficult to accept the ceremony from a positive perspective. A generational conflict arises between Amelia and Celi, as Amelia believes in these rituals, rejoicing in the possibilities of reviving the forgotten customs, and celebrating her daughter's growth amidst the presence of knowledgeable women. Celi appears fragile as her vulnerabilities are being exposed.

### **Rationale of the Study in the Present Generation:**

Women see more blood than men, yet they view it as an uncomfortable experience. Proper lack of awareness and discouraged discussions within households can be cited as the primary reasons for this unhealthy approach towards menstruation. Additionally, when a woman is on her monthly cycle, her self-consciousness increases, and she ends up scrutinizing her own body severely. Putting aside the physical pain, she gets emotionally consumed with the pressure of concealing it from society. She finds it shameful to discover blood stains on her clothes and is constantly

irked by the raw smell they leave. They also find it embarrassing to buy sanitary napkins from male shopkeepers out of fear of being judged. To develop a more positive and inclusive approach, it is essential to spread awareness of the importance of accepting and embracing as a natural essence of womanhood. Since education is considered the sharpest tool for bringing societal changes, schools can contribute to an empowering change by introducing lessons and topics that explore these themes, providing a friendly and encouraging atmosphere. It's vital to teach young girls to be vocal about their insecurities and expressing them boldly to acquire help from the right source is of paramount significance.

Young Adult Literature has also played a pivotal role in bringing these events to the forefront, emphasizing the need for such narratives to bring in a positive and inclusive change. *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) by Judy Blume, *Revenge of the Red Club* (2012) by Kim Harrington, *The Red Tent* (1997) by Anita Diamant, *Go with the Flow* (2020) by Karen Schneemann and Lily Williams are some of the popular coming-of-age novels that have strongly depicted fierce female protagonists and their period experiences reflecting the real-life incidents faced by young girls. Inclusion of these seminal works in the academic curriculum can introduce the world of menstruation to students in a friendly and encouraging manner, making them acknowledge this phenomenon as one of the most natural events occurring in a woman's life.

### **Conclusion:**

A woman's strength is unmatched, her resilience is magnificent, her charm is compelling, and her presence is unmissable. One of the UK's leading hormonal health expert, Maisie Hill, in her most celebrated and widely read book *Period Power: Harnessing the Power of the Menstrual Cycle*, quotes: "A simple act of revolution is to learn about your body, to get to know the terrain of your cycle, and to take charge of your health. (...) Our bodies have long been weaponised against us and used to keep us out of positions of influence and power, but the red tide is turning, and it's time for us to take advantage of what our hormones can do for us" (8). The quote aptly reminds women of the importance of accepting and embracing their bodies in any circumstance. Thus, Salazar, through her compelling narrative, has touched upon a sensitive topic and has boldly expressed the need to accept the magnificent transition from a child to a woman, as it symbolizes strength, resilience, and the celebration of a woman's true self.

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