

Why There are Taboos and Ritual Prohibitions for Menstruating Women in Certain Cultures and Religions?

Dr. George Thomas Kuzhippallil

Equality for women, sexuality, Menstruation, menstrual blood are now hot issues of public discussions in different parts of the world especially in India and in Kerala. There are pro and contra arguments for all these issues. The Public and the social media are circulating bundles of opinions regarding all these issues. Even though Kerala is known as the land of educated people, sometimes people react ignorantly and emotionally. Many are swallowing unreasonable words, quirks and fancies of some leaders, or the manipulated news of the media persons who have hidden agendas. Only when we understand the philosophy, origin and development of certain customs and traditions that we can evaluate what is right and what is wrong. I am trying here to look upon the philosophy of certain taboos and prohibitions which originated in different cultures and religions like that of India. I am not writing this article to embarrass any person or to degrade any custom or to judge any tradition. But I want to show other aspects or realities behind many kinds of taboos and prohibitions in many rituals and traditions in different cultures.

Many scholars think that the social bodies of archaic society and the cultural institutions, symbols, belief systems, customs and traditions and art forms, in one way or other have their origins in the sacrificial institutions that prevailed in the ancient societies. The MIMETIC THEORY of Rene Girard, a French –American philosopher, is a good example of this view. Girard says: “Everything we call our ‘cultural institutions’ must stem originally from ritual acts that become so refined over the years that they lose their religious connotations and are defined in relation to the type of ‘crisis’ they are intended to resolve.”¹ With the help of mimetic theory and the theory of scapegoat mechanism Stefan Huber also argues that primarily all archaic cultures were affected by the body experiences of the victims which were the obvious forms of scapegoat mechanism. In archaic societies the body of the victim is treated at first as the cause of the social crisis and is handled with mimetic rage. The body of the victim is seen as that of a monster or devil. The body of the victim, with its monstrous appearance or physical peculiarities is seen as devilish.² The body of the victim sometimes possesses the attribute of decease, like the pest and thereby the parts of the body are exposed, or seen as signals of a danger as for example the evil eye, or some monstrous organs.³ Such handicap is seen as a disorder in the body and thereby is considered as devilish. These handicaps in the physical body made such people to be noticed and they became victims in the archaic society. For example, when we

consider many pictures of gods in different art forms in different cultures representing such figures the question arises whether they were objects of violence that occurred once upon a time out of which they were created. Stefan Huber explains Girardian thinking that such human traits of the victim were one of the reasons by which they were considered as social nuisance. They were marked as those who destroyed social order or harmony and therefore considered to be eliminated to establish social order. That is why the victims were collectively murdered. The way of collective killing was different in different cultural contexts. The body of the victim is either lynched or burned or stoned according to the practice of the place. The concrete physical body of the victim became the place of the outpouring of human ravage and violence. Thus, the tormented body or the separated parts of the body of the victim became a sign of the crisis and human violence. But after killing the victim the collective mass experienced a release of the crisis and peace. Then the littered body of the victim became a sign of the source of peace and order. The pieces of the body of the victim or the ashes of the victim assume a new meaning in the society. That is why the body or the ashes of the original victim are seen as the seeds for plants, food and also of religious, family, and social institutions.⁴ In this way, the concrete physical body of the victim became the source of both crisis and peace in the archaic society. Girard says: “This type of violence is found in classical Greece, in the sinister cult of Dionysos. The attackers rush as one upon their victim. The collective hysteria is such that they literally behave like beasts of prey. They manage to dismember this victim, tear him apart with their hands, with their nails, with their teeth, as if anger or fear made their physical power ten times great. Some times they consume the corpse.”⁵

According to Girard, such mode of lynching the body of the victim by a mob was the archaic form of a judicial system and beginning of all social institutions.⁶ Such a spontaneous lynching is what reestablishes peace and order in society and the victim as intermediary assumes a religious and a divine meaning.⁷ “Once the victim is killed and its body is dismembered, the crisis is over, peace is regained, the plague is healed, all the elements become calm again, chaos withdraws, what is blocked or locked or paralyzed is opened, the incomplete is completed, gaps are filled and the confusion of differences is restored to proper differentiation.”⁸ There occurs a transformation of the body of the evildoer into a body of divine benefactor. Such a victim is deified and the process of killing becomes a ritual to establish peace and order in the society. Girard points out that such a concept is visible in every culture. He says: “In the Sumerian mythology cultural institutions emerge from a single victim: Ea, Tiamat, Kingu. There were opinions regarding the dismemberment of the primordial victim Purusha by a mob as offering sacrifices which produced the caste system. We find similar myths in Egypt, in China, among

the Germanic peoples- everywhere.”⁹ Thus, the ritual killing of the victim established sacrifice as the first social institution which brings peace and order in the archaic societies. Together with sacrificial rituals there were also prohibitions which deny such things which lead human beings to mimetic violence.

It is in this sense that Girard considers all cultural institutions are originated from the sacrificial rites and prohibitions which are pillars of archaic religions and societies. Both rituals and prohibitions help the society to safeguard itself from mimetic mechanism which leads to violence.¹⁰ Girard says: “Rituals and prohibitions can be seen as directed toward the same end, which is the renewed order and peace that emerge from the victimage mechanism; the prohibition and the ritual attempt in different ways to ensure that peace.”¹¹ For him, prohibitions attempt to achieve peace in the society directly by prohibiting everything that touches on or appears to touch on the crisis, whereas rituals make the same attempt through the intermediary of the collective mechanism, which they attempt to release each time.¹² According to Girard, prohibitions are intended to keep distant or to remove anything that deteriorate the human relations and that leads towards reciprocal violence.¹³ In other words, in Girardian thinking prohibitions are related to mimetic conflict. They are made to avoid mimesis or imitations which lead to violence. Girard says:

When all anti-mimetic prohibitions are considered as a whole, from those bearing on the most harmless act to the most terrible (the blood feud), it becomes apparent that they correspond roughly to the steps of an *escalation* of mimetic contagion that threatens more and more members of the community and tends towards progressively more aggravated forms of rivalry over objects which the community is incapable of dividing peacefully: women, food, weapons, the best dwelling-sites, etc.¹⁴

If prohibitions avoid the possibilities of mimetic rivalry, sacrificial rituals are the conclusion of mimetic crisis. Sacrificial rituals channel the mimetic rage and bring peace and order in the society. Girard explains that as it is in the case of founding murder, everyone assembled to participate in an immolation of the victim in sacrificial rituals that might be seen as a sort of lynching. The entire community stands on the one side and the victim on the other side.¹⁵ Girard says: “the community finds itself unified once more at the expense of a victim who is not only incapable of self-defense but is also unable to provoke any reaction of vengeance; the immolation of such victim has unified the community in its opposition. The sacrifice is simply another act of violence, one that is added to a succession of others, but it is the final act of violence, its last word.”¹⁶ Thus, the violence of all against one victim in the sacrificial rites works as means of the purifying and order-bringing violence. It is for this reason

that many of the sacrificial rites were connected with rites of violent actions. Later, such violent actions were substituted by rival contests between opposite parties who joined in sacrifices.¹⁷

According to Girard, it is upon these pillars that cultures are established. That means it is in the process of either avoiding or concluding mimetic rivalry through prohibitions or sacrificial rituals that all other cultural institutions developed in archaic societies. According to Girard, whenever the mimetic contagion occurs in a society there are attempts from the whole community either to avoid it or to find solutions. It is in this process that there developed many elements of cultures like traditions, rituals, customs, practices, judicial system etc. Many of them are connected with religion. That is why Girard says:

Culture does not proceed directly from the reconciliation that follows victimage; rather it is from the double imperative of prohibition and ritual, which means that the entire community is unified in order to avoid falling back into the crisis, and thus orients itself on the model-and the anti-model- which the crisis and its resolution now constitute. To understand human culture it is necessary to concede that only the damming of mimetic forces by means of the prohibition and the diversion of these forces in the direction of ritual are capable of spreading and perpetuating the reconciliatory effect of the surrogate. Religion is nothing other than this immense effort to keep the peace.¹⁸

In this sense, every culture is related to religious thought to keep peace and order in the society. According to Girard, societies which do not have social systems to avoid mimetic rivalries, the religion takes its role. He says: "In societies that do not have penal systems capable of halting the spread of mimetic rivalry and its escalation into a vicious circle of violence, the religious system performs this very real function."¹⁹ That is why many cultures identify themselves with religion or religion with culture. In such situations, any change in religious thought or any transformation of culture is interpreted as threat to the order of society. Anything which interrupt such social order must be either accommodated or rejected just as society as a body which assimilate or reject foreign elements. In this sense, we can also conclude the religious systems of the archaic societies also are built upon the concrete bodies of the victims.

Based on Girardian thinking, Stefan Huber explains further that it is on the background of victimage mechanism and its religious impact on cultures that we can understand many taboos and regulations on purity. Many of them are connected with human body and bodily factors. Stefan Huber explains, for example, the human attitude towards blood and things related to blood.²⁰ He explains this idea by analyzing the thoughts of Girard for whom blood reminds us of the hidden side of the destructive violence in the rivalry which is constituted by the captivation of desires. Girard says: "The properties of blood, for example, vividly illustrate the entire operation of violence...Blood that dries on the victim soon loses its viscous quality

and becomes first a dark sore, then a roughened scab. Blood that is allowed to congeal on its victim is the impure product of violence, illness, or death. In contrast to this contaminated substance is the fresh blood of newly slaughtered victims, crimson and free flowing. This blood is never allowed to congeal, but is removed without trace as soon as the rites have been concluded.”²¹ On the other hand, for Girard, blood also reminds us of the life-giving dimension of the slaughtered victim in the framework of rituals. Girard says: “The physical metamorphosis of split blood can stand for the double nature of violence. Some religious practices make elaborate use of this duality. Blood serves to illustrate the point that the same substance can stain or cleanse, contaminate or purify, drive men to fury and murder or appease their anger and restore life.”²² Both these aspects help us to look back on the role of the human body in establishing order in society. The use of blood is central in the rites by which violence must be purified and must be controlled. **Where the blood played an important role in the sacrificial cults, there were much ritualism. It is on the background of the split blood of any origin, unless it has been associated with the sacrificial rituals, is considered as impure. Girard observes that it is the reason for the primitive taboo surrounding menstrual blood. He says: “Menstrual blood is regarded as impure; menstruating women are segregated from the community. They are forbidden to touch any objects of communal usage, sometimes even their own food, for risk of contamination.”**²³ According to Girard, such taboos are coming from the fear of bloodletting. Even though menstrual bleeding can be distinguished from those virulent forms of violence, it is in many societies regarded as impure of impurities. For Girard, this extreme reaction is only because of the sexual aspect of menstruation.²⁴

Therefore, in this connection we can also think about taboos and prohibitions connected with human sexuality. According to Girard, sexuality is one of those primary forces whose control over man is assured by man’s firm belief in his control over it.²⁵ There are direct forms of abduction, rape, defloration and various sadistic practices as well as indirect actions of indefinite consequences which affect the human body. Sexuality itself has been considered for a long time in human history as something that is ‘bad’ or ‘impure’ in it. But, Girard says: “sexuality is impure because it has to do with violence.”²⁶ Girard observes that it is because of its connection with violence that sexuality like other natural phenomena is present in myths. He says: “In fact, it [sexuality] plays a more important role in them [myths] than does nature itself, but a role that is not truly decisive. Sexuality becomes almost completely explicit in the incest motif. There it is associated with a purely individual violence, one, however, that still masks collective violence. This violence would surely wipe out the community were it not for the religious delusion that the surrogate victim provides.”²⁷ The sexual instincts stimulate mimetic

desire and rivalry even between close relatives. According to Girard, the Freudian comment on incest prohibitions became clear when we look at it on the background of the connection between sexuality and violence. Girard says: "Strangely, it was Freud, with his characteristic genius for observation, who defined the true domain of the prohibition in primitive societies. He noted that the women who were forbidden were those born to the group; these women were therefore the most accessible and were constantly 'at hand', so to speak, or at the disposition of all male members of the group."²⁸ All other prohibitions related to sexuality are also come to be in existence because of its connection to mimetic violence. Girard says that even within the ritualistic framework of marriage or as soon as one trespasses beyond the limits of this framework, sexuality arouses violence. Sexuality is a permanent source of disorder even within the most harmonious of communities.²⁹ As we have seen before, when the real meaning of sexuality is lost, it leads to violence. When the spousal meaning of the bodiliness is lost, the other becomes a mere object and thereby violence occurs. Girard says: "Like violence, sexual desire tends to fasten upon surrogate objects if the object to which it was originally attracted remains inaccessible; it willingly accepts substitutes. And again like violence, repressed sexual desire accumulates energy that sooner or later bursts forth, causing tremendous havoc."³⁰ According to Girard, it is because of its potency to lead to quarrels, jealous rages mortal combats that sexuality is related to religious rituals. That is why there exist innumerable prohibitions in relation to sexuality in all cultures and religions. He says: "sexual prohibitions, like all other prohibitions, are sacrificial in nature; and all legitimate sexuality is sacrificial. Strictly speaking, between members of the same community, legitimate sexuality exists no more than legitimate violence in the community. The prohibitions involving incest and those directed against murder or ritual killing among members of the same community have a common origin and function."³¹ These prohibitions in the area of sexuality have important roles in establishing and maintaining order in the living together of humans either in a family or in a society. According to Girard, that is why blood sacrifices, legitimate sexuality according to matrimonial regulations, never choose partners or 'victims' among those who live together. That is why many marriage vows are duly attended by ritualized violence or analogous to other forms of ritual warfare.³² He says: "This systematized violence resembles the endless cycle of revenge that might well rage inside if there were no substitute for it outside the community, and the reciprocal exchange of violence with outsiders is one with the exchange of women that provides men with sexual objects from outside the community."³³ In such an exchange women are considered only as objects of sexual pleasure that substitutes for violence.³⁴ Through such exchanges, the female body becomes an object which satisfies the violent thirst of the male. In

other words, such exchanges express that it is at the cost of the female body that the social order comes either into a family or into a society.

In such order-bringing exchanges and in other mimetic cycles in archaic societies, women were also the scapegoats. By analyzing the fact of the goddesses in archaic religions, Wolfgang Palaver explains that most of them were the scapegoats in the sense of Girardian thinking.³⁵ He says that the number of the goddesses which are more than that of gods in archaic religions is a sign neither of the matriarchal cultures nor of the focus on the matriarchal societies. But, according to the Girardian thinking, these goddesses were only scapegoats in archaic religions.³⁶ The concepts of mother-gods were the divinised victims of mimetic violence. Palaver explains that because of the physical weakness of the women, they were treated as necessary scapegoats in many cultures. Moreover, based on the notion, 'the weaker leave the field to the stronger,' women were put aside to the normal social gatherings. They were only passive spectators in the social gatherings. Palaver mentions Girardian explanation about the religious and cultural structure of a society prevailing in certain South American villages like that of Bororo.³⁷ In such societies, the village is laid out in the form of an almost perfect circle divided up according to the social categories. The men's house is in the center and entrance is forbidden to women. Women inhabit on the periphery of the circle and they are never allowed to move to another house. According to Girard, this immobility of the women was considered as the trait of the existence of 'matriarchy' in such societies.³⁸ Palaver also points out that the discrimination of women is very clear in many cultures from the very beginning. He says that women were forbidden to take arms in many cultures. That is why they were even forbidden the works of a butcher, of a priest who offered sacrifices or of a cook.³⁹ Palaver observes that there are numerous examples in myths where women are pictured as blood drinking vampires. The Germanic Valkyrie, the Amazonians, the vengeful Erinyes, the Maenads, the Orpheus killers and the Bakchen in Dionysian myths were some of the mythical examples of blood thirsty women.⁴⁰ According to Palaver, all such projections of women and the discriminations of women are related to scapegoat mechanisms. Because of their physical weakness, women are always seen as potential victims in society and are kept away from the main stream of society.⁴¹ Girard says: "Like the animal and the infant, but to a lesser degree, the woman qualifies for sacrificial status by reason of her weakness and relatively marginal social status. That is why she can be viewed as a quasi-sacred figure, both desired and disdained, alternatively elevated and abused. A reading of Greek mythology and tragedy (especially the plays of Euripides) with particular attention to the possible inversion of the sexes would undoubtedly yield some striking results."⁴² In the light of this study, we can also well

understand the paradoxical situations in Indian society where there are numerous mother-gods on the one side and discriminations towards women.

Thus, we can understand the importance of rituals and practices exist in different cultures which cannot be corrected immediately with any verdicts or protests. There are reasons behind the existence of such practices. If the progressive thinkers want to change the customs and traditions, they have to change their believe systems not protesting and accumulating mobs who can turn into violence immediately.

¹ Rene Girard, *I see Satan Fall Like Lightning*, translated by J.G. Williams, Mary Knoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001, 91.

² Cf. Girard, 2001, 55; Rene Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World: Research undertaken in collaboration with J.-M. Oughourlian and G. Lefort*, translated by S.Bann and M. Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987, 120ff.

³ Cf. Stefan Huber, *Leib Christi und Heilsdrama: kulturtheologische und theologische Zugänge zur Kirche als Gemeinschaftskörper*, Saarbrücken, Deutschland:VDM Verlag, Dr. Müller, 2007, 105; Cf. Rene Girard, “*To double business bound*”: *Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978, 116ff.

⁴ Cf. Girard, 2006, 459 referred by Stefan Huber 2007, 104.

⁵ Girard, 2001, 64.

⁶ Cf. Girard, 2001, 65.

⁷ Cf. Girard, 2001, 65.

⁸ Girard, 2001, 65.

⁹ Girard, 2001, 82.

¹⁰ Cf. Rene Girard, *Violence and Sacred* translated by P. Gregory, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1977, 193f.

¹¹ Girard, 1987, 29

¹² Cf. Girard, 1987, 30

¹³ Cf. Girard, 1987, 13.

¹⁴ Girard, 1987, 19.

¹⁵ Cf. Girard, 1987, 24.

¹⁶ Girard, 1987, 24.

¹⁷ Cf. J.C. Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship, and Society*, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985, 28. J.C. Heesterman explains such violent and rival actions in Indian sacrificial rites. He says that there were many contests especially chariot races and verbal contests like those were in the *mahavrata*, *vajapeya*, *rajauya* and *aswamedha* sacrifices.

¹⁸ Girard, 1987, 32.

¹⁹ Girard, 1987, 41.

²⁰ Cf. Stefan Huber, 2007, 107.

²¹ Girard, 1977, 36-37

²² Girard, 1977, 37

²³ Girard, 1977, 33.

²⁴ Cf. Girard, 1977, 34.

²⁵ Cf. Girard, 1977, 34.

²⁶ Girard, 1977, 34.

²⁷ Girard, 1977, 118

²⁸ Girard, 1987, 74.

²⁹ Cf. Girard, 1977, 35

³⁰ Girard, 1977, 34

³¹ Girard, 1977, 219

³² Cf. Cf. Girard, 1977, 220. Mackenzie and Warwick explain such warfare in the marriage ceremonies called Swayamvara. They notice a voice like thunder that happened at the swayamvara of the daughters of the king of Kasi in India: "Kings ever favour the swayamvara, and obtain wives according to its rules. But learned men have declared that the wife who is to be most highly esteemed is she who is taken captive after battle with the royal guests who attended swayamvara." Donald A. Mackenzie and Warwick Goble, *Indian Myth and Legend*, Forgotten Books, 2008, 169.

³³ Girard, 1977, 220

³⁴ In relation to such exchanges we can also understand the marriage rituals and dowry system prevailing in India.

³⁵ Cf. Wolfgang Palaver, *René Girards mimetische Theorie im Kontext kulturtheoretischer und gesellschaftspolitischer Fragen*, Wien: LIT Vorlag, 2004, 373-385.

³⁶ Cf. Palaver, 2004, 381-382.

³⁷ Cf. Girard, 1977, 140, referred by Palaver, 2004, 383.

³⁸ Cf. Girard, 1977, 140.

³⁹ Cf. Palaver, 2004, 383. Palaver says that it is because of such customs that there is no feminine form for such words.

⁴⁰ Cf. Palaver, 2004, 383.

⁴¹ Cf. Palaver, 2004, 384.

⁴² Girard, 1977, 141-142.