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CULTURAL STIGMA AGAINSTS TAMIL WOMEN IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the cultural stigma experienced by Tamil women as depicted in the film *Pad Man*. The film portrays the struggle of a man from the Tamil community who challenges deep-rooted customs regarding menstruation and sanitary napkins. Using a descriptive qualitative method with a content analysis approach, this research identifies and interprets scenes that reflect cultural stigma. Data were collected through repeated observation of the film, followed by thematic categorization of stigmatizing practices such as spatial exclusion, ritual prohibition, and limited access to menstrual products. The analysis is guided by identity representation theory to examine how stigma is symbolically and discursively constructed. The findings reveal four main forms of stigma: discrimination in sacred places, social isolation in designated spaces such as *muttuvedu*, lack of access to proper sanitary pads, and widespread ignorance about reproductive health. These practices not only reinforce gender inequality but also lead to psychological distress, including shame, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal. The film critiques these traditions while also highlighting grassroots innovation and education as pathways to change. This study concludes that *Pad Man* serves as both a cultural critique and a medium for social advocacy. By making invisible stigma visible, the film contributes to broader efforts to normalize menstruation and promote gender-inclusive health practices in rural India.

Keywords: *cultural stigma, Tamil women, Pad Man film, menstruation taboo, gender inequality, social exclusion, reproductive health*



INTRODUCTION

Culture is defined as a way of life that is passed down from generation to generation through various learning processes to create a way of life that is most suitable to the environment. Culture consists of basic assumptions learned by a group through solving external adaptation and internal integration problems Syakhrani (2022). However, in practice, culture can also give rise to various forms of stigma, especially against women. This often occurs as a result of social norms and traditions that are considered sacred but instead limit women's freedom and well-being.

Several previous studies have examined menstrual stigma in various cultural contexts. Kamini (2022) found that many socio-religious traditions across ancient civilizations have considered menstrual blood as unclean or even dangerous, while only a few aboriginal tribes view menstruation as sacred. Apriyani (2022) analyzed representations of masculinity in *Pad Man*, but focused more on the male protagonist's identity rather than the experiences of Tamil women. Other studies have discussed menstrual taboos in South Asia, yet few have specifically examined how Tamil cultural practices such as *muttuveedu* isolation are represented in popular cinema. Furthermore, research on the psychological impact of menstrual stigma—such as shame, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal—remains limited in the context of Tamil women.

The gap addressed in this study is the lack of a focused analysis on the *cultural stigma specifically targeting Tamil women* as portrayed in film media. While *Pad Man* has been studied from the perspectives of masculinity and social entrepreneurship, its detailed depiction of Tamil women's lived stigma has not been systematically explored using identity representation theory. Therefore, the novelty of this research lies in its exclusive emphasis on how cultural stigma is constructed, visualized, and critiqued in *Pad Man*, with particular attention to practices of spatial exclusion, ritual discrimination, and lack of access to menstrual health products.

Menstruation, as a biological phenomenon, is often still a topic shrouded in stigma and taboo in various cultures. In many societies, menstruation is not only viewed as a natural process but is also labeled with various myths, beliefs, and prejudices that limit women's roles in everyday life. This inherent cultural stigma not only affects women's mental and physical health but also reinforces gender inequality. The film *Pad Man* by R. Balki, based on the true story of Arunachalam Muruganantham, presents a powerful perspective on this issue. The film explores the struggles of a man who tries to break the social taboo surrounding menstruation by creating homemade and environmentally friendly sanitary pads for women in rural India. In addition to discussing reproductive health issues, *Pad Man* also



discusses the social and cultural challenges faced in efforts to deconstruct the stigma associated with menstruation. This article aims to analyze how cultural stigma surrounding menstruation is represented in *Pad Man* and how the film's narrative contributes to a broader social discussion on the normalization and education of menstruation. Thus, this study is expected to provide new insights into the role of media, particularly film, in overcoming taboos and promoting social change related to menstruation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in identity representation theory, which examines how social identities are constructed, contested, and reproduced through cultural texts such as films. Identity representation theory argues that media not only reflects reality but also actively shapes how social groups are perceived and treated Hall (1997). In the context of stigma, representation becomes a site of power where certain identities are marginalized, stereotyped, or rendered invisible.

Stigma, as defined by Goffman (1963), refers to an attribute that is deeply discrediting and reduces the bearer from a whole and ordinary person to a tainted and discounted one. In the case of menstruation, stigma operates through symbolic pollution beliefs, spatial segregation, and discursive silence. These mechanisms are not merely individual prejudices but are embedded in cultural institutions such as religion, family, and education.

Applying this framework to *Pad Man*, the film serves as a representational space where Tamil women's stigmatized identity is both shown and challenged. By analyzing scenes of exclusion from temples, isolation in *muttuveedu*, and shame associated with buying sanitary pads, this study identifies how cultural stigma is visually and narratively encoded. At the same time, the film's portrayal of innovation and education offers an alternative representation—one that seeks to replace stigma with dignity and knowledge. Thus, identity representation theory allows this research to move beyond mere description of stigma toward an analysis of how stigma is produced and potentially undone through cinematic storytelling.

METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to describe and analyze the cultural stigma that appears in the film *Pad Man*. This approach allows the researcher to interpret social phenomena as they are represented in the film's narrative and visual elements.



Data were collected through repeated observation of the film *Pad Man* (2018, directed by R. Balki). Content analysis was conducted by identifying scenes, dialogues, and visual cues that show cultural stigma against Tamil women. Each scene was coded into thematic categories: (a) discrimination in sacred places, (b) social isolation, (c) lack of access to sanitary pads, and (d) lack of education and awareness. The unit of analysis was each distinct scene or sequence that explicitly addressed menstruation-related stigma.

Identity representation theory was used as an analytical lens to examine how cultural stigma is presented, reinforced, or challenged in the film. Special attention was given to the positioning of Tamil women as speaking subjects or silent objects, the visual framing of stigmatized spaces (e.g., isolation huts), and the narrative resolution that either restores or transforms their social identity.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the film *Pad Man* successfully depicts the cultural stigma experienced by Tamil women regarding menstruation and sanitary pads. The film also shows how women there often face discrimination and taboos in society. Based on the content analysis, four main categories of stigma were identified:

1. Discrimination in Sacred Places

The film depicts a scene where a woman who is menstruating is prohibited from entering sacred places or temples. This reflects the belief that women during their menstrual period are considered unclean and can contaminate places of worship. Such discrimination is not merely symbolic; it reinforces the idea that women's bodies are inherently polluting, which in turn justifies their exclusion from public religious life. Over time, this exclusion extends to other domains, normalizing women's secondary status.

2. Social Isolation

In several scenes, women who are menstruating are isolated from their families and social environments. They are forced to live in separate places and are not allowed to interact with other family members. In their native environment, they refer to their place of isolation as *muttuvedu*, where they do not carry out their usual activities, such as cooking. Usually, when they are in this place, their family members, such as their husbands and children, cook for them. However, in recent years in the Shanmugathai area, there is no longer an isolation place called *muttuvedu*. One woman said that since the place no longer exists, she always



sleeps outside her house next to an iron stove. This adaptation shows that even when formal isolation structures disappear, informal exclusion persists, forcing women into uncomfortable and unsafe sleeping arrangements.

3. Lack of access to sanitary pads

In addition to social isolation, the film also highlights the issue of access to proper sanitary pads. In several scenes, women have to use old cloth or unhygienic materials because they cannot afford sanitary pads. This causes health problems and adds to the stigma they experience. When they buy sanitary pads, it is as if they are buying illegal drugs, because using sanitary pads is considered disrespectful to customs, and women who use them are shunned by the people around them. This finding aligns with Kamini (2022), who noted that stigma often materializes through restricted access to health commodities. The shame associated with purchasing pads also prevents market solutions from reaching those in need.

4. Education and awareness

One of the most important findings is the lack of education and awareness about menstruation and reproductive health. Many women and the general public do not have correct information regarding menstruation. This reinforces the stigma and taboos that exist in society. For example, some women in the film believe that menstruation is a disease or a curse rather than a biological process. Men, including husbands, are shown to be completely ignorant, which perpetuates a cycle of silence and shame. The film suggests that education is not only about distributing information but also about changing deeply held emotional and moral attitudes toward women's bodies.

The film *Pad Man* clearly illustrates how cultural stigma can affect the lives of women in the Tamil tribe. It shows the importance of education and awareness in changing negative perceptions of menstruation and sanitary pads. This film can be an effective tool for raising public awareness of these issues.

The stigma and discrimination depicted in this film also have a significant social and psychological impact on women. Social isolation and discriminatory treatment can cause stress, low self-esteem, and feelings of worthlessness. Women who experience this stigma may feel ashamed and afraid to talk about menstruation, which can prevent them from seeking help or support. Over time, internalized stigma may lead women to self-exclude from social opportunities, even when formal barriers are removed. This psychological dimension is often overlooked in



public health interventions, yet it is central to the lived experience of Tamil women in the film.

CONCLUSION

Although many people oppose the traditions surrounding the Tamil tribe, especially regarding menstruation, some Tamil women do not mind the customs they have practiced for many years. Some women even say that it comes back to each individual's customs and beliefs. This suggests that change must come from within communities, not only from external advocacy. The film *Pad Man* explicitly depicts the stigma that Tamil women face in relation to menstruation, which is considered taboo and leads to their exclusion from society. Cultural traditions and norms marginalize women, with menstruation being seen as a symbol of impurity, often leading to women being ostracized during their period. This creates barriers for women in accessing adequate health products, which ultimately affects their physical and mental health.

However, this film shows efforts to break this stigma. It conveys a very important message about the importance of education, empathy, and innovation in overcoming cultural and gender inequality. Thus, *Pad Man* not only criticizes cultural stigma but also provides inspiration for inclusive social change. The film demonstrates that media can serve as a catalyst for de-stigmatization by making visible what is usually hidden and by offering alternative representations of women as knowledgeable, dignified, and capable of change.

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