



Empowered or Excluded: Female Puberty and the Contested Liminalities of Rites of Passage

C. J. Sonowal

Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Centre for the Study of Social Inclusion, Sion-Trombay Road, Deonar, Mumbai. E-mail: moina@tiss.ac.in, chunuda@yahoo.com

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Abstract: Female puberty rituals, centered on menarche, function as critical rites of passage that mark the transition from girlhood to womanhood across diverse societies. These ceremonies recognize physiological maturation while imbuing it with cultural meanings, often framing menstrual blood paradoxically as a symbol of vigour (fertility, spiritual potency) and impurity (pollution, danger to manhood), leading to taboos that enforce seclusion, restrictions, and exclusion from power domains. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's tripartite model (separation, liminality, incorporation) and Victor Turner's concepts of liminality and *communitas*, this article analyzes global indigenous and tribal examples—from transformative African (Krobo Dipo, Bemba Chisungu) and American (Navajo Kinaaldá, Apache Na'ii'ees) rituals celebrating renewal to restrictive Asian practices mediated by caste hierarchies. Findings reveal universal structures but varied liminal experiences: empowering *communitas* in supportive contexts versus oppressive control in pollution-framed ones. Socially, rituals foster identity, solidarity, and resilience, yet often reproduce gender and intersectional inequalities. Transformations amid globalization integrate health education while preserving the essence. Critically, menstruation taboos serve as exclusionary mechanisms, amplified by caste in India, highlighting rituals as contested arenas. The study advocates for reframing vigour narratives to promote equity and indigenous-led adaptations.

Keywords: Caste mediation; *Communitas*; Female initiation; Intersectionality; Liminality; Menstruation taboos; Rites of passage.

Introduction

Female Puberty Rituals as a Contested Process

Menstruation, the cyclical shedding of the uterine lining that marks reproductive maturity, has been enveloped in a complex web of beliefs, taboos, and restrictions

across global societies, often symbolizing both profound vigor and perceived impurity or danger (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). In many cultures, menstrual blood is viewed as polluting—capable of weakening men, contaminating sacred spaces, or disrupting social harmony—leading to sanctions such as isolation, prohibitions on cooking, temple entry, or handling food, and associations with chaos or sin (Arora, 2017; Kumari, 2019). For instance, in South Asian contexts like Nepal's *chhaupadi*, menstruating women are banished to sheds, reflecting deep-seated fears of blood's defiling power (Guardian, 2017). Globally, these taboos, often justified through religious texts such as Leviticus in Judaism or Vedic scriptures in Hinduism, enforce gender hierarchies by excluding women from power-related domains—rituals, leadership, or public life—perpetuating misogyny and limiting agency (Schmidt, 1987; Wood, 2020). Yet, in some indigenous traditions, blood symbolizes life force and spiritual potency, inverting pollution into a source of renewal and strength (ActionAid UK, 2019).

The arrival of puberty, particularly menarche, has been almost universally marked by human societies through elaborate rituals, ceremonies, and practices that serve as critical rites of passage (van Gennep, 1960). These rites, ranging from celebratory festivals to periods of seclusion and purification, serve as cultural mechanisms for acknowledging physiological changes while transmitting values related to gender, sexuality, purity, fertility, and social order. Worldwide examples illustrate this diversity: the *Krobo Dipo* in Ghana involves seclusion, instruction, and public parades affirming womanhood and linked to psychological well-being (Abbey et al., 2021); the *Navajo Kinaaldá* connects girls to the deity Changing Woman through endurance and blessing (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003); the *Latino quinceañera* emphasizes family honor and autonomy (Romo et al., 2014); and Indian menarche rituals blend celebration with restrictive taboos mediated by caste and class (Ganguly & Satpati, 2021; Sukumar, 2020).

The social significance of these rituals is profound: they announce marriageability and reproductive capacity, solidify alliances, transmit gendered knowledge, and provide structured pathways to adult identity (Paige & Paige, 1981; Ellen, 2012). Public and scholarly perceptions remain polarized—positive views celebrate cultural continuity and empowerment, while critiques highlight patriarchal control, sexuality policing, and stigma reinforcement, often intersecting with caste, class, or ethnicity (Sowjanya, 2019; Verdin & Camacho, 2019).

This article argues that female puberty rituals are not monolithic sites of either oppression or celebration but contested cultural arenas where traditional norms,

modern identities, and intersectional inequalities dynamically intersect and are negotiated. The lived meaning and impact of any ritual are contingent upon this negotiation, producing outcomes that range from psychological empowerment to social marginalization. Understanding their role in contemporary society requires examining the discursive, pedagogical, and performative mechanisms through which these rites reproduce, challenge, or transform structures of gender, power, and belonging, with particular attention to how menstrual beliefs mediate experiences across global contexts.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in the foundational anthropological theory of rites of passage, as pioneered by Arnold van Gennep (1960) in *Les Rites de Passage*, and critically expanded by Victor Turner (1969) in *The Ritual Process*. These frameworks provide essential lenses for analyzing female puberty rituals as structured yet contested processes, where biological transitions intersect with cultural meanings of gender, purity, and power. Van Gennep's model posits that all rites of passage facilitate social transitions through three universal phases: separation (detachment from one's prior status), liminality (a transitional, ambiguous state), and incorporation (reintegration into a new identity). Applied to female puberty rites, separation often involves isolation post-menarche (e.g., hut confinement in Bemba Chisungu or seclusion in Indian practices), liminality encompasses instruction or ordeals (e.g., endurance in Navajo Kinaaldá or symbolic purification in Krobo Dipo), and incorporation marks communal recognition (e.g., parades or blessings affirming womanhood) (Richards, 1982; Markstrom & Iborra, 2003; Abbey et al., 2021). This tripartite structure explains how rituals mitigate the ambiguities of adolescence, channeling physiological changes into culturally sanctioned roles.

Turner's elaboration on liminality transforms van Gennep's middle phase from a mere transition into a potent, creative space of anti-structure, where everyday hierarchies dissolve, fostering *communitas*—an egalitarian sense of solidarity. In female rites, liminality can be subversive, generating bonds among initiates and elders (e.g., sisterhood in Krobo instruction); yet, it often remains domestic and less publicly dramatic than its male counterparts, reflecting gender asymmetries (Steggstra, 2005; Lincoln, 1981). Turner's dual view of liminality—as both liberating and vulnerable—highlights its potential for control, as seen in pollution-framed Indian seclusions that enforce patriarchal discipline (Turner, 1969; Arora, 2017;

Kumari, 2019). Rituals thus emerge as “social dramas,” where norms are performed and contested, extending to intersectional critiques where caste mediates outcomes (e.g., compounded exclusion for Dalit women) (Sukumar, 2020; Sowjanya, 2019).

While van Gennep and Turner offer structural and processual insights, alternative perspectives, such as evolutionary psychology, frame these rites as adaptations that regulate sexual competition and signal maturity (Weisfeld, 1997). Critically, these theories require decolonial refinement to address biases toward male/public rites and incorporate intersectionality, amplifying how power dynamics shape liminal experiences (Smith, 2012). By integrating these, the study moves beyond description to examine rituals as arenas where empowerment and subjugation negotiate amid global variations.

Research Questions

1. How do cultural beliefs surrounding menstrual blood as a symbol of impurity influence the structure and symbolic meanings of female puberty rituals in indigenous African and Oceanic societies?
2. In what ways do van Gennep’s tripartite model (separation, liminality, incorporation) and Turner’s concept of *communitas* manifest in female puberty rites, and how do they facilitate identity formation amid patriarchal restrictions?
3. To what extent have globalization, urbanization, and health campaigns transformed traditional female puberty rituals, particularly in terms of shortening durations and integrating modern education, while preserving cultural significance?
4. How do menstrual taboos function as exclusionary mechanisms in rites of passage, limiting women’s access to power domains, and what counter-narratives of fertility and renewal emerge in American and Asian indigenous contexts?
5. What is the social significance of female puberty rituals in fostering communal bonds and resilience, especially in post-colonial settings where colonial suppressions have impacted indigenous practices?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate the cross-cultural beliefs, taboos, and social sanctions associated with menstruation and menstrual blood, assessing their role in perpetuating gender inequalities worldwide.

2. To apply van Gennep's and Turner's theoretical frameworks to analyze the processes and meanings in female puberty rituals, highlighting liminality and *communitas* as sites of temporary empowerment.
3. To examine the social significance of female puberty rituals in human societies, including their contributions to identity formation, communal resilience, and the transmission of cultural values.
4. To trace the historical and contemporary transformations of female puberty rituals, evaluating adaptations to modernization and their implications for cultural preservation and gender equity.
5. To explore counter-strategies within puberty rituals that reframe menstrual taboos positively (e.g., as symbols of fertility), and assess their potential for challenging patriarchal exclusions in diverse societies.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative secondary data synthesis and narrative review approach to examine female puberty rituals as contested rites of passage, drawing on existing anthropological, ethnographic, feminist, and cultural sources. This design is particularly well-suited for synthesizing diverse global perspectives without requiring primary data collection, allowing for a comparative and critical discourse analysis that aligns with the research argument that rituals serve as arenas of negotiation (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). The narrative review method facilitates the integration of theoretical frameworks—van Gennep's (1960) tripartite model and Turner's (1969) concepts of liminality and *communitas*—to interpret ritual structures, meanings, and social implications, while addressing intersectional mediations such as caste. The process is interpretive, focusing on thematic synthesis to map discursive tensions and develop a conceptual framework, directly supporting the RQs on cultural beliefs, theoretical manifestations, transformations, exclusionary mechanisms, and social significance, as well as ROs for discourse analysis, intersectional examination, and framework building.

Data Sources

Data were sourced from a corpus of secondary materials, including

Ethnographic and Anthropological Literature: Seminal texts on specific rituals, such as Richards (1982) on Bemba Chisungu, Markstrom & Iborra (2003) on

Navajo Kinaaldá, and Farrer (1991) on Apache Na'ii'ees, alongside comparative works like Schlegel & Barry (1991) on adolescence and Buckley & Gottlieb (1988) on menstruation symbolism.

Journal Articles and Books: Peer-reviewed publications from databases like JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar, covering menstrual taboos (e.g., Arora, 2017; Kumari, 2019), caste intersections (e.g., Sukumar, 2020; Sowjanya, 2019), and global variations (e.g., Ganguly & Satpati, 2021; Joshy et al., 2019).

Cross-Cultural Databases and Reports: Resources such as the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) for coded excerpts on puberty rites (Ember & Ember, 2001), as well as organizational reports on health implications (e.g., ActionAid UK, 2019; The Guardian, 2017).

Historical and Narrative Accounts: Colonial and contemporary indigenous narratives are utilized to trace transformations, with feminist critiques (e.g., Manorama & Desai, 2020; Smith, 2012) cross-referenced for added context.

Sources were selected based on their relevance to female initiation, menstrual beliefs, social significance, and theoretical alignment, prioritizing diversity across regions (Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Oceania), with a particular focus on India for its intersectional depth.

Data Collection Procedures

A systematic narrative review was conducted using keywords such as “female puberty rites,” “menarche rituals,” “menstruation taboos,” “liminality gender,” “caste menstruation,” and “indigenous initiation” across academic databases. Inclusion criteria targeted sources providing detailed ritual descriptions, theoretical analyses, or intersectional insights into global/indigenous contexts, from 1950 onward to capture historical and contemporary views. Exclusion criteria omitted non-scholarly blogs (except for illustrative narratives), overly generalized texts, or male-focused studies. Approximately 150 sources were screened, with 60 selected for review, ensuring balanced coverage of the duality between vigour and oppression, as well as caste mediation.

Data Analysis

Analysis followed a three-phase narrative synthesis

Structural-Discursive Mapping: Descriptive coding cataloged rituals by phases (separation, liminality, incorporation), followed by theory-driven coding for

discursive frames (e.g., purity/impurity, vigour/empowerment) and liminal character (communitas vs. control), using NVivo for thematic organization (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Intersectional Analysis: Focused coding on menstruation's dual role and caste mediation, examining how sources portray differentiated experiences (e.g., upper-caste celebration vs. Dalit exclusion), integrating power dynamics and counter-narratives.

Conceptual Synthesis: Triangulation of themes to trace transformations and social significance, developing a framework evaluating liminality's outcomes (empowerment vs. subjugation) via the comparative method (Murdock, 1967).

This ensured alignment with theoretical perspectives, explaining how van Gennep's structure and Turner's liminality manifest amid inequalities.

Ethical Considerations

As a narrative review of secondary data, the ethical risks are low; however, the study prioritizes cultural sensitivity by centering on indigenous and feminist sources, acknowledging colonial biases in ethnographies, and respecting intellectual property through proper citations (Smith, 2012).

Limitations

Reliance on secondary sources may perpetuate observer biases in older texts; limited access to non-English or unpublished indigenous narratives can potentially overlook important voices. Narrative review subjectivity is mitigated by systematic coding; however, future primary studies could validate these findings.

Findings

The Universal Structure and Varied Liminal Experiences in Female Puberty Rituals

Secondary sources consistently affirm van Gennep's (1960) tripartite model as a foundational structure across global female puberty rituals, with separation, liminality, and incorporation marking the transition from girlhood to womanhood. This model offers a systematic framework for understanding how societies navigate the biological and social complexities of puberty, particularly menarche, by separating the girl from her childhood status, placing her in a transitional state

of transformation, and reintegrating her with new responsibilities. However, as Turner (1969) emphasizes, the character of the liminal phase—whether it generates *communitas* (egalitarian solidarity) or enforces control—determines the ritual’s potential for empowerment or oppression, revealing profound cultural variations in meaning-making.

In African contexts, the Krobo Dipo rite in Ghana exemplifies transformative liminality. Girls undergo separation into a designated space, followed by collective instruction, head-shaving, and bead-wearing, fostering a sense of *communitas* and shared preparation. Incorporation involves public parades affirming marriageability and adult status, which are linked to positive psychological outcomes, such as lower distress (Abbey et al., 2021; Steegstra, 2005). The meaning-making here centers on verifying purity and celebrating fertility, with the ritual transmitting cultural lore on womanhood, ethics, and communal harmony, thus reinforcing matrilineal bonds and social cohesion. Similarly, Bemba Chisungu in Zambia features hut confinement (separation as symbolic death to childhood), symbolic “cooking” to maturity (liminality with elder teachings on motherhood and taboos), and dancing emergence (incorporation as rebirth), symbolizing the taming of raw fertility into cultured adulthood while building intergenerational *communitas* among women (Richards, 1982).

North American indigenous rituals highlight sacred ordeals and cosmic connections, where liminality channels spiritual vigor. The Navajo Kinaaldá involves isolation (separation), rigorous running, corn-grinding, and molding to embody Changing Woman (liminality as a pathway to spiritual knowledge and endurance), with incorporation through blessings that confer healing powers and community integration, symbolizing renewal and resilience amid historical disruptions like colonization (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003; Frisbie, 1967). The Apache Na’i’iëes mirrors this with four-day dancing reenactments (liminality testing physical and spiritual resilience), generating *communitas* through shared feasting and labor, meaning-making endurance as empowerment, and linking the girl to mythic deities for communal well-being (Farrer, 1991; Global Citizen, 2016).

In Latin American contexts, the quinceañera emphasizes celebratory incorporation, with preparatory lessons in dance and spirituality (liminality framed as positive training for autonomy), culminating in a Catholic mass and festive party (incorporation affirming family honor and ethnic identity). The meaning-making revolves around transitioning from childhood innocence to emerging womanhood,

often serving as a mechanism for strengthening familial alliances and cultural continuity in diaspora communities (Romo et al., 2014; Verdin & Camacho, 2019; Paige & Paige, 1981).

In contrast, many Asian and South Asian rituals construct liminality as restrictive and polluting, reflecting Brahmanical purity frameworks. Indian menarche practices often involve strict seclusion post-menarche (separation as quarantine from impurity), dietary prohibitions and purification baths (liminality as pollution control to manage the body's "danger"), with incorporation via feasts conditional on restored purity, symbolizing fertility while enforcing social discipline (Ganguly & Satpati, 2021; Joshy et al., 2019; My Avni, 2022; Dhanalakshmi & Victoria, 2025). Tamil Manjal Neerattu Vizha includes jasmine baths and gifts (liminality blending celebration with taboos), meaning-making auspicious renewal and protection from evil, yet reinforcing marriageability norms (Clarke, 2009). These rituals highlight ambivalence, where liminality serves as a tool for socializing girls into hierarchical roles.

Oceanic and other indigenous examples show similar duality in liminal experiences. Māori rituals honor blood as regenerative mana with prayers and seclusion (liminality as sacred awakening), empowering through whakapapa (genealogy) connections and fostering mana (spiritual authority) for communal renewal (Global Citizen, 2016; Even more fascinating first-period traditions around the world! n.d.). Some Australian Aboriginal practices involve scarification and bathing (liminality to tame "wild" femininity), harnessing vigour while taboos exclude women from men's lore, meaning-making Dreamtime connections and kinship continuity (Berndt & Berndt, 1985; Young, 2013). Among the Sara in Chad, contingent life-crisis responses include seclusion and symbolic rebirth, symbolizing endurance and integration into social order (Lapushkina, 2020).

This global comparison reveals that the core divergence in ritual experience lies in the cultural construction of liminality—as either a space for generative *communitas* or for reinforcing social control—which directly influences outcomes ranging from empowerment to subjugation.

Menstruation's Dual Symbolism: Vigour and Oppression

Menstruation emerges as a paradoxical symbol—embodying female vigour (life force, fertility, spiritual potency) while serving as a medium of oppression through taboos framing blood as polluting and dangerous to manhood (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988). Positive beliefs celebrate vigor: in Ojibwe berry fasts, blood's potency

requires seclusion to channel healing power, linking women to lunar cycles and nature's rhythms (ActionAid UK, 2019); Dogon huts pamper girls, viewing blood as a connection to ancestors and cosmic vitality (Menstruation and Cultural Practices, 2024). Māori karakia frame it as regenerative, fostering mana and renewal within whānau structures (Global Citizen, 2016; Even more fascinating first-period traditions, n.d.). In hunter-gatherer societies, observances without uncleanness connotations celebrate blood's vigour as origins of culture through synchronized rituals (MENSTRUATION AND THE ORIGINS OF CULTURE, n.d.; Culture and menstruation - Wikipedia, n.d.).

Oppressively, taboos exclude women from power: chhaupadi banishes menstruators to sheds, reinforcing subordination and health risks (Guardian, 2017; Socio-cultural implications for women's menstrual health in the Pacific Islands, 2022); Vedic and Brahmanical discourses deem blood impure, barring temple entry and perpetuating cyclical liminality as social control (Schmidt, 1987; Arora, 2017; Kumari, 2019). In Micronesia, Ifaluk women cannot cook for non-husbands, isolating them domestically (A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, n.d.). Feminist critiques argue taboos co-opt protective origins for patriarchal domination, demonizing bodies and excluding them from public spheres (Women, blood, and dangerous things, 2023; A Critical Appraisal of Theories of Menstrual Symbolism, n.d.; Wood, 2020; Sengupta, n.d.). In Malawi, rituals extend to transgender experiences, amplifying intersectional marginalization (Manorama & Desai, 2020; Perianes & Ndaferankhande, 2020).

Social Significance and Intersectional Mediation

Rituals forge identity, solidarity, and continuity, generating *communitas* in supportive contexts (e.g., Apache feasts, Krobo sisterhood) while reproducing hierarchies elsewhere (Turner, 1969). In post-colonial settings, they preserve heritage against erosion, as in Navajo Kinaaldá's cultural anchoring (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003). Socially, they announce marriageability, solidify alliances, and transmit gendered knowledge (Paige & Paige, 1981; Ellen, 2012; Karunakaran & Somasundaran, 2016). In Sri Lanka, jasmine baths protect and renew, integrating familial networks (Ingram, 2025); ancient Chinese hair-pinning underscores piety (Global Citizen, 2016). Hindu Ritu Kala Samskara honors fertility with feasts, affirming matrilineal value (Crystal View, n.d.; Chakraborty, n.d.). Assam's Tuloni Biya celebrates awakening through baths, binding communities (Chakraborty, n.d.).

Historical privacy in Roman doll dedications or European rites protects while affirming reproduction (Her Half of History, 2024). Modern variations, influenced by socioeconomic context, promote awareness but risk stigma if absent (SCIE, 2025). Commodification in festivals signals hybridity, maintaining fabric amid globalization (Her Half of History, 2024; ActionAid UK, 2019).

Indian Caste Mediation in Female Puberty Rituals

The mediation of caste in Indian female puberty rituals represents a critical intersectional fault line, where menstrual practices and rites of passage are not uniformly experienced but are profoundly shaped by social hierarchies. This expansion draws on ethnographic and feminist scholarship to illustrate how caste influences the structure, discursive framing, and lived outcomes of these rituals, often amplifying oppression for lower-caste and Dalit women while affording relative ceremonial privilege to upper-caste groups. As highlighted in the manuscript, caste transforms what might appear as a universal feminine transition into a mechanism for reproducing differentiated social subjects, with pollution ideologies intersecting with caste-based exclusion (Sowjanya, 2019; Sukumar, 2020).

Caste as a Mediator of Ritual Experience

In upper-caste contexts, puberty rituals like Ritu Kala Samskara or Manjal Neerattu Vizha are often portrayed as ceremonial family events that blend celebration with controlled seclusion. For instance, among Brahmanical communities, menarche is marked by ritual baths, gift-giving, and feasts that symbolize the restoration of auspicious fertility and purity, with liminality framed as a temporary, honored state (Ganguly & Satpati, 2021; My Avni, 2022). This mediation allows for a discourse of cultural pride, where the girl's incorporation reinforces family status and marital alliances, often within endogamous caste networks (Karunakaran & Somasundaran, 2016). However, even here, underlying taboos—rooted in Vedic texts—enforce restrictions like avoiding temples or cooking, perpetuating a gendered control that ties women's bodies to caste purity (Schmidt, 1987).

In contrast, for Dalit and lower-caste women, these rituals compound marginalization, transforming liminality into a site of intensified stigma and exclusion. Dalit feminist scholarship argues that menstrual pollution ideology intersects with caste hierarchies, where Dalit women face “double exclusion”—biological impurity amplified by caste-based untouchability (Sowjanya, 2019;

Sukumar, 2020). Sukumar's (2020) assertion, "Caste is my period," encapsulates how menarche becomes a metaphor for enduring discrimination, with rituals enforcing harsher seclusion or denial of celebratory elements due to economic constraints and social ostracism. In rural settings, lower-caste girls may experience menarche without formal rites, leading to internalized shame and limited access to education on hygiene, exacerbating health disparities (Joshy et al., 2019; Ahamed, 2021). This mediation reveals rituals as tools for maintaining endogamy and social boundaries, where upper-caste purity norms justify Dalit women's exclusion from shared spaces, perpetuating intergenerational cycles of oppression (Manorama & Desai, 2020).

Class further intersects with caste: urban, educated upper-caste families may reform rituals into symbolic celebrations, incorporating modern elements such as health education, whereas rural lower-caste contexts retain rigid taboos due to limited resources (Arora, 2017; Kumari, 2019). Regional variations amplify this: in Kerala or Tamil Nadu, matrilineal influences may soften exclusions for some castes, but in North India, stricter Brahmanical norms prevail (Dhanalakshmi & Victoria, 2025). Critically, this mediation fractures the "universal" feminine subject in rites, producing differentiated experiences: empowerment for privileged castes versus subjugation for marginalized ones, aligning with intersectional critiques that highlight how biology is weaponized to sustain caste-patriarchy (Sowjanya, 2019).

Reformist narratives, as depicted in media portrayals, aim to reclaim rituals by emphasizing celebration; however, they often overlook caste disparities, thereby risking the erasure of Dalit voices (Aswathy & Meenu, 2025; Yadav & Gaur, 2023). Ultimately, caste mediation highlights rituals as contested arenas, where the potential for liminality to foster *communitas* is often curtailed by hierarchical enforcement, underscoring the need for decolonial analyses to amplify subaltern perspectives.

Discussions

Explaining Female Puberty Rituals Through Theoretical and Intersectional Lenses

The elaborate findings from this secondary data analysis provide a nuanced portrait of female puberty rituals as dynamic rites of passage, revealing their role in navigating the physiological and cultural complexities of menarche while exposing underlying power dynamics. Grounded in Arnold van Gennep's (1960) tripartite model of separation, liminality, and incorporation, and Victor Turner's (1969) emphasis on liminality as a space of anti-structure and *communitas*, this discussion

critically synthesizes the findings to address the research questions (RQs) and objectives (ROs). It highlights how these rituals, while structurally universal, vary in their liminal character—often fostering empowerment through vigour symbolism or perpetuating oppression via taboos—shaped by intersectional factors like caste. Critically, the analysis extends these theories by interrogating their gender and cultural biases, advocating for decolonial and intersectional refinements to better capture the contested nature of these practices.

Theoretical Explanations of Ritual Structure and Liminal Variation

Van Gennep's framework effectively explains the universal structure observed in the findings, where separation detaches girls from childhood (e.g., seclusion in Krobo Dipo or Navajo Kinaaldá), liminality facilitates transformation (e.g., instruction in Bemba Chisungu or endurance in Apache Na'ii'ees), and incorporation reintegrates them as adults (e.g., parades or blessings symbolizing fertility and community roles) (Abbey et al., 2021; Richards, 1982; Markstrom & Iborra, 2003; Farrer, 1991). This progression mitigates adolescent ambiguities by channeling biological changes into socially sanctioned maturity, aligning with RO 3's examination of social significance in fostering identity and cohesion. However, Turner's lens on liminality as a creative, anti-structural phase adds critical depth, illuminating how this "betwixt and between" state generates *communitas* in supportive contexts—such as the sisterhood in Krobo instruction or intergenerational bonds in Navajo corn-grinding—temporarily suspending hierarchies to build resilience (Steedstra, 2005; Frisbie, 1967). Critically, the findings expose Turner's male-centric bias (Lincoln, 1981), as female liminality is often perceived as domestic and less subversive; yet, it still enables normative *communitas* for cultural transmission, as seen in Māori *karakia*, which fosters *mana* (Global Citizen, 2016).

A key critique is the politics of liminality: in restrictive settings, such as the Indian menarche seclusion, which is framed as a means of pollution control, it enforces discipline rather than liberation, perpetuating patriarchal norms (Ganguly & Satpati, 2021; Joshy et al., 2019). This addresses RQ 2 by showing how van Gennep's phases and Turner's *communitas* manifest unevenly, facilitating identity amid restrictions but often reinforcing exclusion. For instance, in Dalit contexts, liminality compounds stigma, transforming rituals into tools of caste-patriarchy rather than a means of empowerment (Sukumar, 2020; Sowjanya, 2019).

Menstruation's Dual Role: Beliefs, Taboos, and Exclusionary Mechanisms

The findings' portrayal of menstruation as a dual symbol—vigour in indigenous American and Oceanic rites (e.g., spiritual potency in Ojibwe berry fasts or regenerative mana in Māori practices) versus impurity in Asian taboos (e.g., chhaupadi isolation)—directly responds to RQ 1 and RO 1, showing how beliefs shape ritual structures (ActionAid UK, 2019; Global Citizen, 2016; Guardian, 2017). Vigour narratives celebrate blood as life-giving, inverting pollution during liminality to empower women as cultural guardians, as in Dogon ancestral connections (Menstruation and Cultural Practices, 2024). Critically, this aligns with Turner's liminal creativity, where vigour enables counter-narratives of renewal, addressing RO 5 by highlighting reframing potentials in hunter-gatherer origins (MENSTRUATION AND THE ORIGINS OF CULTURE, n.d.).

However, the oppressive dimension dominates in many contexts, where taboos frame blood as dangerous to manhood, enforcing exclusion from power domains like temples or decision-making (Buckley & Gottlieb, 1988; Schmidt, 1987; Arora, 2017). This responds to RQ 4, illustrating taboos as mechanisms that limit agency—e.g., Ifaluk cooking prohibitions or Vedic cyclical liminality, which perpetuates subordination (A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstruation, Menstrual Taboos, n.d.; Kumari, 2019). Intersectionally, caste amplifies this in India: upper-caste rituals ceremonialize purity, while Dalit experiences yield “double exclusion,” with blood stigma layering untouchability to deny communal honors and exacerbate vulnerabilities (Sukumar, 2020; Sowjanya, 2019; Manorama & Desai, 2020). Critically, this extends van Gennep's incorporation as incomplete for marginalized women, critiquing theories for overlooking how biology intersects with social hierarchies to sustain oppression (Wood, 2020; Sengupta, n.d.).

Social Significance, Transformations, and Post-Colonial Resilience

Rituals' social significance lies in forging bonds and continuity, as per RQ 5 and RO 3, with *communitas* in Apache feasts or Krobo sisterhood countering isolation and transmitting norms (Farrer, 1991; Steegstra, 2005). In post-colonial settings, they preserve identity against erosion, as Navajo Kinaaldá anchors heritage amid assimilation (Markstrom & Iborra, 2003; Sapiens, 2019). Critically, this resilience is intersectional: while empowering for some, rituals reproduce hierarchies in others, as seen in Indian caste mediation, where upper-caste celebrations contrast with the marginalization of Dalits (Joshy et al., 2019; Ahamed, 2021).

Transformations due to globalization, as per RQ 3 and RO 4, shorten durations and integrate health/education (e.g., Krobo HIV awareness); however, the risk of commodification dilutes *communitas* (Steege, 2005; Sapiens, 2019). In India, reformist media narratives reclaim pride but often erase caste disparities, calling for inclusive adaptations (Aswathy & Meenu, 2025; Yadav & Gaur, 2023). Critically, these changes challenge van Gennep's linearity, as hybrid forms blend tradition with modernity, fostering agency in re-scripting (Smith, 2012).

In synthesis, the findings affirm rituals as contested arenas, extending theories by integrating intersectionality to explain uneven outcomes. This calls for decolonial research that amplifies marginalized voices, addresses theoretical biases toward male/public rites, and explores how counter-narratives can disrupt exclusions for gender equity.

Conclusion

This secondary data synthesis of female puberty rituals, viewed through van Gennep's tripartite structure and Turner's lens of liminality and *communitas*, reveals a universal ritual form profoundly varied in its execution and impact. While separation, liminality, and incorporation consistently frame the transition from girlhood to womanhood, the liminal phase emerges as the decisive arena where cultural meanings of menstruation—vigour or impurity—are inscribed, determining whether rituals empower through *communitas* and renewal or oppress through control and exclusion.

Findings affirm that in many indigenous contexts, such as Krobo Dipo, Navajo Kinaaldá, and Apache Na'ii'ees, liminality fosters transformative solidarity and spiritual potency, conferring resilience, healing roles, and communal integration. In contrast, restrictive practices, particularly in South Asia, construct liminality as pollution management, enforcing patriarchal and caste hierarchies, with Dalit women experiencing compounded marginalization. Menstruation's dual symbolism—life force in some traditions, danger in others—underpins these divergences, functioning as exclusionary mechanisms that limit women's agency while counter-narratives of fertility offer pathways for reframing.

Socially, these rituals forge identity and bonds, preserving heritage in post-colonial settings. Yet, transformations amid globalization—such as shortened durations and health integration—signal adaptability without erasing inequalities. Ultimately, female puberty rituals are contested arenas where empowerment and subjugation

negotiate, shaped by intersectional power dynamics. Reframing vigour narratives and amplifying marginalized voices hold potential for equity, urging indigenous-led reimaginings that honor dignity while challenging oppressive legacies.

Recommendations

Female puberty rituals hold vital cultural and social value for traditional societies—fostering identity, resilience, and communal bonds—while often reinforcing patriarchal exclusions. Reforms must critique oppression but preserve these benefits through balanced, community-led changes.

- **Reframe Menstruation Positively:** Shift the symbolism from impurity to vigor and fertility (e.g., adopt Navajo/Māori models of renewal). Action: Communities integrate education on menstrual power during liminality, reducing stigma while retaining celebratory elements (ActionAid UK, 2019).
- **Shorten Restrictive Liminal Phases:** Replace harmful seclusion (e.g., chhaupadi) with supportive group activities. Action: Elders and health workers co-design short, inclusive sessions focusing on mentorship and rights, maintaining *communitas* without isolation (Steegstra, 2005; Guardian, 2017).
- **Address Caste/Class Disparities:** Ensure rituals are inclusive, avoiding amplification of hierarchies. Action: Prioritize Dalit/subaltern voices in redesign; create parallel equitable rites if needed, challenging “double exclusion” (Sukumar, 2020; Sowjanya, 2019).
- **Integrate Modern Education:** Add health, consent, and equity modules without erasing cultural essence. Action: Partner with NGOs for workshops during rituals, blending tradition with empowerment (Abbey et al., 2021; Sapiens, 2019).
- **Promote Indigenous Agency:** Empower communities to lead adaptations. Action: Support participatory forums for girls/elders to re-script rituals, ensuring cultural survival and gender justice (Smith, 2012).

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