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## Theme Area:

# Bloodlines of the Sacred: Menstruation, Myth, and Cultural Memory in South Asian Traditions

## Performing Womanhood: Menstruation, Ritual and Gender Construction in *Ritu Kala Samskaram*

**Abstract:** *Menstruation, though a universal biological phenomenon, acquires culturally specific meanings through ritual, symbolism and social regulation. In India, menarche is frequently marked through ceremonies that publicly signal a girl's transition into womanhood. This paper examines Ritu Kala Samskaram, a South Indian menarche ritual, as a critical site where gender identity is not merely recognized but actively produced. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the study argues that womanhood emerges not as a natural outcome of biological maturation but as a culturally scripted identity constituted through repeated rituals. Through practices such as seclusion, ritual purification, adornment and public celebration, the adolescent body is reconstituted as a socially acceptable feminine subject. The study demonstrates that menstrual initiation rituals operate as powerful ideological mechanisms through which gender is performatively produced, stabilized and enforced. By reframing Ritu Kala Samskaram as a performative process rather than a neutral tradition, the paper highlights the ritual's role in shaping gendered subjectivity and regulating womanhood within Indian cultural frameworks.*

**Keywords:** *Ritu Kala Samskaram*, Gender Performativity, Menstruation, Ritual, Womanhood

## **Performing Womanhood: Menstruation, Ritual and Gender Construction in**

### *Ritu Kala Samskaram*

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#### **Introduction**

Across cultures, menstruation functions as a significant biological and social marker that signals a girl's transition into womanhood. While the onset of menstruation is a universal physiological experience, its cultural interpretations vary widely. In many traditional societies, particularly in India, menstruation is not merely understood as a biological process but as a sacred and symbolic event. The attainment of menarche is often marked through elaborate rituals that publicly recognize the girl's new social status. These celebrations are closely linked to fertility, reproductive potential and the community's perception of a girl's readiness for marriage and motherhood. Thus, menstruation becomes not only a sign of physical maturity but also a powerful cultural declaration of womanhood.

India's rich ritual traditions reflect deeply paradoxical attitudes toward menstruation. On the one hand, it is revered as a manifestation of *Shakti*, the creative female power. On the other, it is viewed through notions of impurity and pollution. This dual perception transforms menstruation into a carefully regulated social event rather than a private bodily experience. The coming-of-age rituals associated with menarche symbolically induct the girl into new social expectations rooted in ideals of femininity, sexuality, marriage and reproduction. Through these cultural practices, the female body becomes a site where social meanings are actively produced and controlled.

Historically, women have been identified and evaluated through their bodies that are romanticized in literature yet restricted in social and political life. The female body is not merely biological. It is shaped by cultural, moral and ideological forces. Menstruation, in particular, remains one of the most intensely regulated aspects of womanhood, surrounded by cultural anxieties about purity, sexuality, fertility and control. Within this context, menstrual rituals acquire profound ideological significance.

This paper examines the South Indian menarche ritual known as *Ritu Kala Samskaram* through the theoretical framework of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. *Ritu Kala Samskaram* is a ceremonial celebration of a girl's first menstruation, marked by seclusion, ritual bathing, adornment, gifting of the first saree and public festivities. While these rituals appear celebratory, they simultaneously inscribe the female body with new meanings, expectations and social limitations. The

ritual does not merely acknowledge a biological transformation but formally introduces the girl into a socially constructed feminine role.

Drawing on Butler's theory, this study argues that gender is not a natural outcome of biological sex but is produced through repeated social performances. Rituals, bodily gestures, dress codes, restrictions and public visibility function as tools through which gender identity is enacted and reinforced. From this perspective, *Ritu Kala Samskaram* actively produces femininity by transforming a menstruating girl into a socially recognized woman through performative acts rather than biological change alone. The central argument of this study is that menstrual rituals like *Ritu Kala Samskaram* operate as sites of gender performance that construct a girl's identity as a future wife and mother by emphasizing fertility and reproductive potential. The ritual simultaneously celebrates and disciplines the female body through notions of purity, pollution and moral regulation. The girl's body, once publicly acknowledged, becomes subject to stricter behavioral norms, spatial restrictions and social surveillance. By situating *Ritu Kala Samskaram* at the intersection of body, culture and power, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the ritual is not merely a cultural celebration but a powerful performative process through which gender identity is inscribed upon the female body. The study therefore positions menstrual rituals as key cultural sites where womanhood is socially produced, regulated and performed.

## **Literature Review**

Scholarly discussions on menstruation increasingly situate it within the broader intersections of biology, adolescence, ritual and socio-cultural meaning. The article "The Social Brain in Adolescence" emphasizes that menstruation, puberty rituals and adolescent socio-cultural behavioral patterns are historically and psychologically interlinked. "Adolescence is characterized by psychological changes that affect an individual's sense of identity, their self-consciousness and their relationship with others" (Blakemore 269). The article states that menstruation festival and socio-cognitive changes are interdependent. It is socially mediated through ritual, symbolism and collective behavior. This cultural mediation becomes most explicit in religious interpretations of menstrual blood, where it is not viewed as polluting but as a potent source of life and power. An ethnographic study of the Kamakhya temple in Assam presents a striking counter-narrative to dominant notions of menstrual impurity.

If the goddess gives power and fertility to the world through the blood of her annual menstrual flow, her priests and devotees also return blood to Kamakhya in the form of sacrifice. The primary public form of worship at Kamakhya is now- and probably always has been- animal sacrifice, which to this day is offered several times a day throughout the year, and hundreds of times on holy days. According to the *Kalika Purana*, the male gods like Ganesa, Siva and Krsna can be worshipped with sweets, chanting, religious vows, etc, but the goddess can only be satisfied with blood. Animal sacrifice

has, of course, been performed throughout the Hindu traditions of India since the time of the *Vedas*, which centre in large part around the performance of yagna or sacrifice. Although animal sacrifice was gradually removed from mainstream Hindu traditions, it has survived in the marginal areas of India, such as parts of the south, Bangla, and in hilly tribal areas like Assam. Sacrifice, either as a physical ritual or as a symbolic trope, is a recurring structural theme in Hindu tradition- one encountered, as Madeleine Biardeau points out, in the *Vedas*, in the Epics and the *Puranas*, in bhakti literature and in *Sakta Tantra*. (Urban 514- 515)

Menstrual blood, in this sacred context, becomes generative rather than defiling. While Kamakhya represents a pan-Indian religious framework that sacralizes menstruation, Caldwell's study of puberty rites in Kerala reveals the deeply ambivalent nature of menstrual symbolism at the community level.

The onset of menstruation at puberty is an ambivalent event. The symbolism of the puberty rite celebrates the fertility of the young girl, likening her to the budding coconut and ripening paddy; she is presented with the auspicious items given to a bride. But menstruation, while signalling the potential for fertility and birth, also implies a danger: the intense emotions of sexual desire which are believed to accompany physical maturity may lead the girl to disaster if not restrained and controlled until her marriage. Menstruation in a married woman signals the loss of a potential foetus, a death of sorts. In menstruation, the death, desire, and heat are intimately interwoven. (Caldwell 119)

Extending this discussion, there are also arguments that the current perception of menstruating women as impure represents a historical degeneration rather than an original cultural truth.

People not only consider her blood as pure but also flock from different parts of India and world to seek blessings from Maa Sati, form of Parvati in Kamakhya temple situated at Assam. In Kamakhya temple, Maa Sati yoni (Vagina) is worshipped and also a festival celebrating menstruation takes place termed as Ambubachi Mela. Hence to consider female as impure during menstrual cycle is a form of deteriorated understanding over the time due to lack of understanding over the generation. There are several celebrations related to periods in India, which if studied with vigor and opted by people all over the country and remove the barriers to women emancipation and empowerment in true sense. Anything that is celebrated can never be impure as nothing impure is ever celebrated. (Janhawi and Priya 353-354)

Taken together, these studies collectively reveal that menstruation in Indian cultural traditions is not a fixed biological fact but a socially negotiated phenomenon shaped by ritual, religion, gender control and symbolic meaning. From Blakemore's developmental-cultural framework to Urban's sacred economy of blood and from Caldwell's ambivalent puberty rituals to Janhawi and Priya's critique of modern menstrual stigma, the literature demonstrates that menstrual blood has consistently oscillated between sacred power and social anxiety.

## Research Gap

Existing studies on menstruation and puberty rituals in India have predominantly focused on religious symbolism, anthropological documentation and sociological interpretations, particularly those centred on notions of purity and pollution. While these approaches offer valuable insights into the cultural significance of menstrual practices, they often treat menstruation primarily as a biological or symbolic event, rather than as a dynamic site of gender construction. Consequently, the ways in which these rituals actively shape, regulate and perform gender identities remain insufficiently examined. Menarche rituals such as *Ritu Kala Samskaram* function not merely as markers of biological transition but as deeply performative, symbolic and political practices that publicly constitute femininity. However, there is a noticeable lack of theoretical engagement with these rituals as performative spectacles that generate gendered subjectivity through embodied repetition, visual display and social regulation. In particular, the application of theoretical frameworks, such as Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, to the study of Indian menstrual rituals remains limited. Moreover, interdisciplinary studies that examine menstruation as a site of embodied performance, where the body becomes a medium through which cultural norms of womanhood are enacted and enforced, are scarce. This study seeks to address this gap by reinterpreting *Ritu Kala Samskaram* as a cultural site where gender is not merely recognized or discovered but actively produced. By foregrounding performativity, the paper offers a nuanced reading of menstrual rituals as mechanisms that construct, stabilize and legitimize normative gender identities within Indian cultural frameworks.

## Methodology

This study adopts a theoretical and qualitative research methodology grounded in theory of gender performativity. It examines *Ritu Kala Samskaram* as a culturally embedded ritual that actively participates in the construction and regulation of gender. The analysis conceptualizes gender not as a natural or biological essence but as an identity constituted through repeated social and bodily acts. Using interpretative and textual analysis, the paper explores how the ritual practices associated with *Ritu Kala Samskaram* contribute to the performative production of womanhood. The study critically examines key ritual elements such as seclusion, ritual purification, public celebration, gifting of the first saree, jewellery and other adornments, treating them as symbolic and performative acts that inscribe culturally normative femininity onto the adolescent body. These practices are analyzed as repetitive and regulated performances through which the girl's transition from childhood to womanhood is socially enacted and legitimized.

The study relies on sources, including anthropological accounts, feminist scholarship and cultural studies on menstruation and puberty rituals in India. These materials are interpreted through

Butler's theoretical framework to reveal how menstrual rituals function as ideological mechanisms that shape gender identity, discipline the body and reinforce normative expectations of womanhood. This methodological approach enables a critical interrogation of *Ritu Kala Samskaram* as a performative cultural process that produces gendered subjectivity rather than merely marking biological change.

### ***Ritu Kala Samskaram: The Ritual***

*Ritu Kala Samskaram* is a traditional Hindu coming-of-age ceremony performed to mark a girl's attainment of menarche. Also known as *Ritusuddhi*, the ritual is widely observed in several South Indian communities and is regarded as a significant rite of passage that symbolically announces a girl's transition from childhood to womanhood. While the onset of menstruation signifies a biological milestone of physical maturity, *Ritu Kala Samskaram* transforms this intensely private bodily event into a socially acknowledged and culturally meaningful occasion. Through ritual performance, the biological fact of menstruation is converted into a public marker of gendered identity.

The ritual is not merely a celebration of physical and emotional growth but also a ceremonial induction of the girl into the social category of woman. One of the most prominent features of the ceremony is the gifting of a saree, which the girl often wears for the first time on this occasion. The saree functions as a powerful cultural symbol of adult femininity, modesty and marital potential, marking a visible shift in the girl's social status. Along with the saree, she is adorned with jewellery, flowers and new clothes, reinforcing her newly assigned feminine identity and visually presenting her as a woman to the community.

Traditional belief holds that the rituals associated with *Ritu Kala Samskaram* purify both the body and the soul of the girl, protecting her from negative influences and ensuring her physical and spiritual well-being. At the onset of menstruation, the girl is typically placed in seclusion in a separate room within the household. This period of isolation reflects the cultural understanding of menstrual impurity while simultaneously functioning as a liminal phase, an in-between state that prepares her for transformation. During this time, only women, especially elder female relatives and neighbours, are permitted to visit her. They bring gifts, food and words of blessing, instructing her in the expectations of womanhood, reproduction and domestic responsibility.

On the concluding day of the ceremony, a ritual bath is performed by the mother and other elder women of the household. This bathing ceremony serves as a symbolic act of purification, renewal and rebirth into a new social identity. Following the bath, the girl is formally dressed in new clothes and ornaments, after which a *Griha Pravesh*, which is a ceremonial re-entry, is conducted. The public nature of this final stage, often accompanied by guests, food and celebration, reinforces the community's collective recognition of her altered status. Thus, *Ritu Kala Samskaram* functions not only as a

celebratory ritual but also as a carefully structured social process that redefines the girl's bodily and social identity. By moving her from isolation to public display, the ritual converts a biological transition into a culturally sanctioned transformation into womanhood. In doing so, it both affirms femininity and inscribes the norms, expectations and responsibilities associated with being a woman within the cultural framework of the community.

### **Gender as Performance: Butler's Framework**

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity was first articulated in her influential work *Gender Trouble*, in which she challenges the traditional understanding of gender as a natural and stable outcome of biological sex. Butler argues that being born male or female does not automatically determine one's behavior, identity or social role. Instead, individuals learn to perform gender through repeated actions that conform to socially constructed expectations. Gender, therefore, is not something one is but something one does. It is enacted through everyday acts such as walking, speaking, dressing, gesturing and interacting with others. These repeated performances create the illusion of a stable gender identity. Butler in the *Gender Trouble* states that "Performativity is not a singular act, but a representation and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (Butler *Gender Trouble* xv). Butler also states that gender is "real only to the extent that it is performed. It seems fair to say that certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, and that these either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in way" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 527). She also mentions "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler *Gender Trouble* 43-44). According to Butler, gender is not an inner truth or an essential identity waiting to be expressed. Rather, it is produced through continuous performance. Gender exists because it is repeatedly enacted within social life. There is no pre-existing gender identity behind these expressions. Instead, identity itself is constituted through these very acts. Gender is not a fixed essence but a social process that is continuously created and reinforced through performance.

Butler further explains that gender performativity does not imply that gender is a deliberate or conscious performance, like acting on a stage. Rather, individuals perform gender by repeatedly following social norms that already exist. These norms become so deeply ingrained that they appear natural and inevitable. She observes that certain acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender identity and they either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way. Through this repetition, gender norms gain stability and appear as natural truths.

Another important aspect of Butler's theory is her claim that gender is inherently unstable. Since gender depends entirely on repeated performances, it can never be fully fixed or secured. Butler

therefore describes “being a woman and a man” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 43) as internally unstable affairs. Because gender is constantly being produced through performance, it is always open to change, disruption and reinterpretation. From this theoretical perspective, rituals, cultural practices, dress codes, bodily regulations and social ceremonies become powerful sites of gender performativity. These social acts do not merely reflect gender identity, they actively participate in creating and reinforcing it. Gender is thus understood as a cultural construction sustained through repeated bodily acts within a regulatory social framework. This understanding of gender performativity becomes particularly significant when applied to ritual practices such as *Ritu Kala Samskaram*. The ritual can be viewed as a performative site where femininity is not simply acknowledged but actively produced through symbolic acts, bodily regulation, dress, seclusion and public visibility. Through this lens, gender emerges as a socially scripted identity imposed upon the body rather than a natural outcome of biological change.

### ***Ritu Kala Samskaram*: Ritualising Menarche and Social Transition**

Within Indian cultural epistemologies, menstrual initiation rituals such as *Ritu Kala Samskaram* function not merely as celebrations of biological maturation but as ideological tools that actively constitute gendered subjectivity. When examined through Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, the ritual emerges as a regulatory cultural performance through which femininity is not expressed but produced. The onset of menstruation, though biological in origin, becomes socially meaningful only through ritualized repetition, symbolic inscription and public recognition. Thus, womanhood is not uncovered through the ritual. Instead, it is materialized through culturally sanctioned acts that reiterate normative femininity.

Central to this process is the visual reconstruction of the adolescent body through sartorial and aesthetic coding. The gifting of the saree, a garment discursively associated with adult femininity, sexuality and marital eligibility, marks a symbolic reclassification of the body from childhood to culturally legible womanhood. Ornamentation with flowers and jewellery further aestheticizes the female body, inscribing it within dominant visual realms of desirability, purity and grace. These embodied practices exemplify Butler’s assertion that gender is constituted through “stylized repetition of acts,” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179) whereby the body becomes the site upon which cultural meanings of femininity are continuously rehearsed and stabilized.

The public nature of the ritual intensifies this performative transformation. The ceremonial elevation of the girl as the symbolic princess of the household is not merely celebratory but ideologically productive. This staged honor confers social visibility upon her reproductive capacity, transforming biological fertility into a culturally valued resource. The girl’s body is thus repositioned within the patriarchal realm as a future reproductive subject who is visible, assessed and symbolically integrated into the structures of marriage. What appears as glorification simultaneously operates as social

incorporation into heteronormative reproductive futurity. Yet this ritual inscription of femininity is inseparable from disciplinary control. The period following the ceremony often inaugurates new regimes of bodily regulation, behavioral surveillance and moral constraint. Mobility, interaction, bodily behavior and sexual self-expression become increasingly regulated under the rubric of modesty and propriety. *Ritu Kala Samskaram* may be understood as a disciplinary threshold through which the female body transitions from relative social freedom to intensified normative surveillance. Femininity, therefore, is not merely celebrated. It is governed.

Through the convergence of ritual display, aesthetic encoding, public recognition and behavioral discipline, *Ritu Kala Samskaram* functions as a crucial performative site where gender is not revealed but proved. The private physiological experience of menstruation is transformed into a public cultural spectacle that scripts the subject into patriarchal femininity. The ritual thus exemplifies Butler's core argument that gender is not a natural attribute derived from the body but an effect of repeated cultural performances that render certain identities coherent, intelligible and socially enforceable.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined *Ritu Kala Samskaram* not merely as a traditional coming-of-age ceremony but as a powerful performative site where gender is socially produced, regulated and legitimized. While the biological onset of menstruation signifies physiological maturity, this paper demonstrated that womanhood itself is not a natural consequence of biology but a culturally constructed identity enacted through ritualized performance. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the analysis reveals that the ritual does not simply acknowledge femininity. But, it actively creates and stabilizes it through repeated symbolic acts.

Through practices such as seclusion, ritual purification, public adornment, gifting of the first saree and ceremonial re-entry into social space, the adolescent body is scripted into a culturally intelligible feminine subject. These acts function as what Butler terms "stylized repetitions," (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 179) through which the illusion of a stable gender identity is produced. The body becomes the stage upon which normative femininity is performed, linking the girl's identity to ideals of fertility, sexual propriety, marriageability and reproductive futurity. What appears as celebration simultaneously operates as disciplinary control, marking the transition into heightened surveillance, behavioral regulation and moral restraint.

The ritual's contradiction is its simultaneous sacralization and regulation of the menstruating body that exposes the patriarchal logic embedded within cultural traditions. By glorifying fertility while restricting autonomy, *Ritu Kala Samskaram* elevates the girl symbolically even as it narrows the possibilities of her embodied freedom. The transformation it effects is therefore not only social but ideological. Ultimately, this study argues that *Ritu Kala Samskaram* exemplifies how gender is not

something one becomes through nature, but something one is compelled to perform through culture. By converting a private biological event into a public cultural spectacle, the ritual crystallizes the performative production of womanhood. Recognizing such rituals as sites of power, rather than neutral traditions, is crucial for rethinking the relationship between body, gender and cultural authority in contemporary society.

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