



Reframing the Bloody Hell: Menstrual Rituals and Practices Among Arab and Arab-Americans

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Reframing the Bloody Hell:
Menstrual Rituals and Practices Among Arab and Arab-Americans

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Abstract

This study investigates menstrual rituals and practices in the Arab and Arab-American population, in order to better understand if menstruation is taboo. Scholarly work has led us to believe that menstruation in the Arab communities is viewed negatively, but is this accurate and does it reflect the same in Arab-American communities? Novels and memoirs provide us with varying reflections, such as excitement, anger, or the day they transitioned into becoming a young woman. Data drawn from scholarly research, novels, memoirs, and conversations with menstruating Arab and Arab-American's have shown this is not entirely true. Menstruating individuals speak about menstruation but in particular settings, and with particular groups of people. This does not fully support the notion that menstruation is taboo in the Arab and Arab-American communities, because where, with whom, and when menstruation is discussed does not lead to an overall label of taboo.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my Sitto, my chosen family, and all Arab and Arab-American menstruating individuals.

Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge and thank all of my friends and family for listening to this project for the past year. They have patiently listened, provided feedback and insight, and most importantly, encouraged me throughout the process.

Second, I would like to thank all of my participants who took time to discuss this topic with me. I understood that it was difficult or uncomfortable to speak about at times, but I value your strength and persistence. Without you this project would not have happened.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

You do not need to pray during your period only because your bleeding is prayer. Not because it is pollution—they got it wrong, it is the other way around. It is prayer so powerful that people, if they knew, would come and touch the feet of the menstruating woman. - Mohja Kahf (2010)

Menstruation is a nearly universal experience in half of the populations lives, yet people's experiences of menstruation remain poorly understood (McPherson & Korfine, 2004). The Middle East is noticeably absent from the existing scholarship on menstruation, “In writing of modern times, I have been struck and no doubt hindered by the absence of overall narrative histories of women in any Middle Eastern country other than Iran, a phenomenon that reflects a period in scholarly writing when such general narratives were often shunned and both monographic and theoretical approaches were favored” (Keddie, 2007, p. 11). More specifically there are almost no accounts from the Levant or first generation Arab-Americans that have been documented or understood.

Additionally, there is little evidence of traditional practices of menstruation in Arab societies, and no current evidence in Arab-American communities. Common beliefs among Arabs have shaped the way many Arab's view menstruation, “Social and cultural factors play an important role in transmission of menstrual knowledge” (Orringer & Gahagan, 2010, p. 841). For example, once a young girl receives her period it is common to stop certain activities such as bike riding, to preserve an intact hymen. Another example, a menstruating woman will not shower while on her period, because the cold water could make her sick and possibly infertile.

My interest in this topic began during the fall of 2014, when I was craving Arab novels in efforts to diversify my readings, and not be fully consumed by academic texts. The novels I was

interested in focused around LGBTQ Arabs, female sexuality, and desire. I started my search for these novels through online searches, recommendations from friends, and blogs. A few weeks into my search I came across a novel titled, *Menstruation* by Ammar Abdulhamid. It was a novel about a young boy who could smell menstruating women and his sexual desire around these women, with whom he had very little contact. This was the first book I read that spoke about menstruation, but I quickly became irritated by it. This book was about a woman's monthly experience, but written by a man! I quickly began to search for other texts written by women about their experiences.

At the same time, I had personally began to think more about my monthly periods. I had felt that my period was beginning to control my life, due to internalized expectations of what a woman's body should look like and do during my period. I was interested in changing my experience with menstruation and began by speaking to my *Sitto*, grandmother, about recommendations for pain remedies. I became more serious about using a menstrual cup which I heard revolutionizes your views on menstruation. Finally, I simply felt the need to discuss periods more with my friends. I was tired of suffering silently as I had once believed was required of me.

With the combination of readings and personal exploration, I began this project by looking at menstruation through the lens of advertisement, due to a memory struck while reading the novel *Menstruation*. One woman in the story was discussing how menstrual products were not advertised, and that signified a social set back, in her opinion, for their community. Reading this brought me back to one summer, while in Syria, around the age of eleven years old. My family always gathers in the sitting room midday, during the summer, because it is the only room with an air conditioner. As we were watching TV together, a commercial came on advertising

menstrual pads. As soon as the commercial revealed itself to be one of menstrual pads, my uncle scoffed, and made a remark about how these things should not be advertised, and walked out of the room. This memory has stayed with me until this point, and I decided I wanted to understand the cultural representation of menstrual items. I was interested in the evolution of advertisement from the 1950s to present day, and how it contributed to societal norms.

As I began some preliminary research on the topic, I found I was more interested in speaking with people about their understandings, rituals, and practices than seeing them through the lens of advertisement. Advertisements do not necessarily reflect society's norms and understandings, simply because most are written by a few elite men. These advertisements can be used on a large global scale, for many diverse groups of people. From reading stories, my personal exploration of menstruation, and discussions with my *Sitto* and friends, I decided I wanted to write on people's experiences of menarche. I decided to focus upon a group of people that I could personally share experiences with, Arab-Americans with parents from the Levant. It was important for me to hear their voices and document these stories. I was searching for similar stories, explanations, and understandings of how practices and rituals have shaped their experiences.

My personal experience with menstruation has been a very taboo topic. In fact, when I made the announcement to my mother on my thesis topic, she could not have been more disappointed in my topic choice. As Emily Martin writes, "Every taboo on something shameful has the potential for rebellion written in it ..." (1987). This thesis is my rebellion into the exploration of women's health. Who else is going to study women's health, except for other women?

In this thesis, I will have conversations with grandmothers, immigrant mothers, and first generation Arab-Americans. I will analyze their statements to understand the cultural construction of menstruation, and show the social and individual uses to which these conceptions are applied in practice. Similarly, I will explore cultural beliefs and practices to determine if there is a connection to it being classified as a taboo subject.

The target population in this study is multigenerational families, consisting of a grandmother who was born and raised in the Levant - Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, or Palestine. The grandmother must have lived in the Levant for 80% of their life, to understand the origins of practices and rituals. Second, the immigrant mother must be born and raised in the Levant, and has not immigrated to the United States prior to the age of 18 years old. Lastly, a menstruating first generation Arab-American over the age of 18 years old. The first generation Arab-American must have been born in the United States, or immigrated to the United States prior to the age of five, and spent most of their developing years in the United States.

Throughout this paper I will be interchanging the words menstruation, period, cycle, and menarche to indicate the same biological process; when the body sheds the lining of the uterus on a monthly basis. I will also be using the term immigrant to describe people who were born and raised in another country but have relocated to the United States. The term first generation is used to describe children of the immigrants who are born, or have moved before the age of 5 years old, to the parent's new country of immigration, and are referred to as Arab-Americans. Arab-Americans can represent one who identifies with Arab and American culture, ethnic, and linguistic heritage.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

I feel their pain: when one is engaged in night after night of intimate commune with the Divine, it is painful to be cut off so instantly. The blood that flows from my vagina comes to mark not only the promise of life but also a spiritual death. - The Zaadi dialogues! (2014)

In my research I have been overwhelmed with negative scholarly narratives of Arab women around sexual health, menstruation, and reproduction. In fact, most of these accounts are around female genital mutilation, menopause, and dysmenorrhea in Arab communities. I cannot deny the negative attitudes surrounding the research and researchers have around Arab women's sexual health. Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth wrote one of the first books on menstruation titled *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* and the only reference to Middle Eastern women in the entire book, reads, "The strongly patriarchal Semetic (Arab) tribes of the Middle East used the menarche as the occasion to remove the girl's clitoris or sew up the lips of the vulva to reduce her sexual pleasure and reinforce her need to be dependent on one man" (1976, p. 96). One sentence on Arabs was supposed to fully describe a 'cultural history' on a population of over 200 million people, according to the authors. Unfortunately, most of my research has indicated that what little could be said about Arabs, focused around female genital mutilation, and has been applied to all Middle Eastern countries. There has been no indication of individuals, most specifically anthropologists, who has researched women's sexual health in the Middle East. Therefore, broad statements have been applied to large groups of people, who have their own history and culture, unique to themselves.

Concurrently, I was also faced with statements that seem to contradict each other, such as, "Blood from menstruation and childbirth remains taboo," and "Parents still consider menstruation an important event in their daughter's life" (Anwar, 2016). Can a taboo event, like

menstruation, also be a significant event? Another statement made by two different authors read, “Muslim parents do not generally talk about menstruation with their daughters. If they do talk, they pass down the religious prohibitions and rules regarding menstruation” (Anwar, 2016); “Some memoirs and anthropological works stress the ignorance of many boys and girls regarding sex and even menstruation, which results in much distress, but this is gradually changing” (Keddie, 2007, p. 107). Therefore, it has been difficult to decipher how menstruation is viewed by Arab and Arab-Americans.

Silence around menstruation was a common theme I came across in my scholarly research. Orringer and Gahagan (2010) conducted a research titled, *Adolescents Define Menstruation: A Multiethnic Exploratory Study*, aiming to understand how different ethnic groups understand menstruation. “They were immigrants or second-generation Americans, which may suggest that traditional Latino and Middle Eastern reticence to discuss issues relating to sexuality may be affecting these girls’ acquisition of knowledge” (p. 84). Another comment by a health care professional states the silence around menstruation and its effect in gaining knowledge, “Inadequate preparation regarding their reproductive health concerns ... this inadequacy was attributed to societal reluctance to discuss matters of sexual nature, taboos and cultural and religious issues” (Jarrah & Kamel, 2012, p. 308). Even the World Health Organization (2001) produced a document that included a comment on silence of menstruation, “A girl learns about menstruation only when she gets her period (p. 58).

A research study of bleeding disorders in Lebanon noted the silence around menstruation but found that, “If the initial contact of a woman participant is with a female investigator, the probability of adherence to the screening protocol is significantly increased because women are unlikely to be comfortable discussing menstrual and childbirth histories with male investigators”

(Khayat, et al., 2014, p. 197). Unfortunately, this was the only mention of their participant's willingness to discuss their periods openly with their female investigators. Other additional studies discussing menstrual health problems, have not included sections discussing their participants approach to this subject.

There is some research covering the topic of menstrual disorders in Arab and Arab-American populations. There has even been research as recent, as the effects of the civil war in Syria on menstruating individuals. These studies have ranged from adolescent dysmenorrhea in Syrians, polycystic ovarian syndrome in Palestinian women, and vaginal infections in Iraqi women. Again, there has been no mention about how their participants view the topic of menstruation or any difficulties they faced when speaking to them.

Discussion of menstruation being taboo has been another common theme in scholarly literature. "In Arab and developing countries, preparing girls for menstruation is not adequate because this topic is considered as embarrassing and as a taboo" (Jarrah & Kamel, 2012, p. 310). Fida Sanjakdar (2009) wrote about the taboo notions surrounding sex health education in Muslim Jordanian families, in Australia. These taboos proved it difficult for an Islamic school to develop an appropriate sex education curriculum, that was also approved by the parents. Not only have we encountered the topic of menstruation being taboo because of faith and embarrassment, I have also uncovered it being taboo because of culture, "Cultural taboos are limiting young people's access to sexual and reproductive services and information (DeJong & El-Khoury, 2006, p. 849).

I also came across similar statements regarding menstruation in the Middle East, "The notion of blood as pollution, especially during menstruation, reiterates a sexist attitude toward women" (Anwar, 2016). Fatima Mernissi (1992) documents that historically, "Pre-Islamic

Arabia regarded menstruating women as polluting, a pole of negative forces” (p.73). Mernissi argues that this is still present today in many Arab communities.

What is even more disappointing is the lack of recent research and literature on menstruation within different communities. With this lack of recent research, many first generation community identities are being forgotten about, “A key dimension of identity structure for first-generation immigrants is the degree to which the secondary, host-culture identity is integrated into the primary, ethnic identity” (Mok, Morris, Benet-Martinez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007). With the challenge of balancing both cultures, that is the cultures of their parents, and the culture of their American peers, it is important to understand how first generation Arab-Americans have straddled both when discussing a potentially taboo topic. “Statements that periods are both normal and defining for females commonly were recalled by Arab American and Mexican American girls, but rarely by the other girls. This may suggest a common theme passed down through generations of Middle Eastern women and warrants further examination” (Orringer & Gahagan, 2010, p. 844).

For reasons stated above, I have expanded my research beyond scholarly resources, to novels, coming of age stories, and memoirs. By including these narratives into my research, I aim to bring these texts and authors forward to participate in the production of knowledge which will contribute to understanding a taboo topic. I believe that this approach to my research brings about a unique perspective and provides counter arguments for scholarly resources, and their research on Arab communities.

A novel by Angela Tehaan Leone (2007), is a story about a first generation, Christian Lebanese-American child, named Irene. The story focuses on Irene and her family, who live in Washington D.C. in the 1950s, and Irene’s struggle with balancing two cultures. This novel is

written about the main character, Irene, but told from her sister's perspective of Irene's life. The novel recounts menstruation in this simple sentence, "After she'd entered puberty and a few girls talked brazenly about 'the curse' or about how 'the visitor' had arrived, my sister turned away shame-faced because Mama said 'it' must never be talked about" (p. 5). The strong use of the language "brazenly", indicates the author's shock at how her classmates could talk so openly about such a topic, when it has been marked as a subject to never be discussed. Second, the use of the word "it" to indicate menstruation, shows that Irene's mother, either grew up never discussing menstruation, or this was a learned practice growing up. An important point to note, this language indicates that menstruation is not a negative or positive bodily function, just one that is never discussed. However, the language used by her classmates shows how negatively they view their menstruation. The language used in this sentence demonstrates the gap that many first generation Arab-Americans find themselves in. Do they participate in such topics with their American friends, or do they turn away from such conversations, because of what they have learned at home?

Understanding how first generation Arab-Americans balance a taboo topic in their home, and a more discussed topic amongst their peers is crucial to understanding identity. As a first generation Arab-American, one finds themselves between two cultures, so which culture really defines this community? *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from Southern Philly*, consists of four narratives about daughters of Palestinian immigrants, searching for meaning in both of their identities. The author writes, "I was an Arab-American. There was a hyphen there, connecting the two things that created me: the one that drew me to him and the other that kept me at a distance" (Darraj, 2007, p. 69). The speaker uses "him" to refer to the dual identity of being Arab and American, to American's she was Arab, but to Arab's she was American. Further, the

distance first generation children feel as they straddle two cultures, is represented by the use of the hyphen when describing their identity.

Mohja Kahf's (2006) novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, is a story about Khadra, a Syrian immigrant growing up in Indiana in the 1970s. Khadra and her family belong to a devout Muslim community in Indiana, and her story discusses what it means to be Muslim, Arab, and American in Indiana. Khadra's chapter on her coming of age experience was opened by this quote, "When your daughter's menarche comes, cook sweet wheat-bean pudding and distribute it to your neighbors in celebration! - Damascene custom of unknown origin (now nearly defunct)" (p. 108). "In most native cultures the world over, the first period is accompanied by rites which give formal notice to the menarcheal child that woman's place in society is indeed a special one" (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1976). By including this traditional practice in this book, it represents a positive tradition and culture around menstruation in old Damascus. This practice of sharing food with others in their neighborhood, shows that their daughters are able to begin bearing children, and therefore are ready for marriage.

Additionally, Khadra goes on to describe that her first reaction to menstruation was a positive one, "periods rock" (Kahf, 2006, p. 109), because Khadra was able to break her fast and begin eating immediately. On top of that, she also recounts the story when her father takes her to the fabric store, and lets her choose whatever material she would like. This material was going to be sewn by her father for her new scarves. This moment described in the book was a very tender moment between Khadra and her father, as they did not have the income to make lavish purchases. "This is a special day Doora. Using a baby name to refer to her" (Kahf, 2006, p. 109).

When reading *Remembering Childhood in the Middle East: Memories from a Century of Change* (Robert Fernea, 2002), I was sure I would encounter a story, or a mention of

menstruation in one of the stories. I believed that I would uncover a story, because generally for young girls the end of their childhood is marked when they received their first period. The memoirs documented here cover the entire Middle East, from Turkey to Palestine to Tunisia, from 1923 to the present.

In the women's stories that I read, I encountered a few references to periods, for example when Nazik Ali Jawad, a woman who grew up in Syria and later in life moved to Iraq, with her husband. The only reference to her period, was the mention of when she started to wear a specific type of covering, when outside the home during her primary school years. This could have indicated the age she began to wear this specific type of covering, however that was not specifically stated. A second story with a reference to a child receiving her period is from Basima Qattan Bezirgan, who was born and raised in Iraq. She mentions she began wearing jilbab [a long, loose fitting traditional Arab dress], but only because everyone did it in Baghdad. Basima did not mention how old she was when she did start wearing the jilbab, but I hypothesize that this was possibly around the time she received her first cycle.

Direct mention of menstruation was found in Maysoon Pachachi's story, "In a hygiene class in grade school in Baghdad I expected they would talk about sex and development, but instead it was a class on malaria, TB, and cholera" (Fernea, 2002, p. 273). Maysoon is an Arab-American, who spent her life between the Middle East and the United States, in the late 1940s to the present. Maysoon described her excitement in what she thought was going to be a sex education course, but instead was met with disappointment.

Fedwa Malti-Douglas grew up in Lebanon in the late 1950s, and eventually immigrated to the United States in her early twenties. Fedwa speaks of her aunt in great detail in her memoir as she was very involved in her childhood, and a very influential person in her life. While Fedwa

does not speak about menstruation in her memoir, she describes a stigma around female bodies viewed through her aunt's health experience, when she was a child. Her aunt was having a serious woman's health problem, but her aunt did not go to her brother, Fedwa's father, due to stigma around female bodies, "Neither fact could wipe out the shame of the body" (Fernea, 2002, p. 238). Fedwa's aunt was dealing with the effects of this serious health problem for years, before she went to see a doctor where she was diagnosed with cervical cancer. This shocked Fedwa, because her father was a doctor. Fedwa's aunt even left the city to have surgery in the capital, when she never even left the house because of shame around her body.

I was shocked to find that menarche was not a significant enough event, in many of the memoirs. These stories remind us of how different human lives can be, and what is significant enough to recount from our childhood years. Understanding these stories can give us a framework for how their identities have been developed, "But most of all, these authors are giving us their own personal understanding of who they are, of what they have become, seen through the prism of childhoods remembered" (Fernea, 2002, p. 5).

A common theme I have come across in the novels, memoirs, and coming of age stories, is that most of these women understood menstruation surrounding pregnancy. "Her mother had prepared her ... anatomical diagrams, fallopian tubes - all scientifically and Islamically ..." (Kahf, 2006, p. 107). "And then I missed my period." - when her cousin had missed her period and was pregnant out of wedlock (Darraj, 2007, p. 93). "You got woman ting? [Irene's mother asks] Irene nodded. Mama walked to Irene and tapped Irene's stomach lightly saying, 'One day baby, maybe many baby'" (Leone, 2007, p. 160).

A second common theme found was the discussion of menstruation around religious practices. For example, in Islam many women believe that while menstruating you cannot pray,

because you are in an impure state. So when women are seen not taking part in group prayers, they are immediately marked as a menstruating woman. In, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (Kahf, 2006), the only other mention of menstruation was when she was asked why she was not joining the group prayer by a non-Muslim. Khadra's story about her first period marked religious significance; rules around praying and fasting when menstruating.

A final theme found in many of these stories is the description of not knowing their period. "Puberty: the unknown door had opened before me, and I saw drops of blood on white, unbleached clothing (Mamdouh, 2005, p.145). "Khadra sees brown coloring on her underwear and asks her mom if this is her period, since she expected it to be red and not brown (Kahf, 2006, p. 108). In contrast, they have almost always been educated on menstruation, in *Naphtalene: A Novel of Baghdad* (Mamdouh, 2005), "My grandmother and Aunt Widad had told me about it, and I was let into the secret" (p. 145). In Khadra's case, her mother was studying to be a doctor in Syria and had spoken to her about her period in scientific terms, prior to her receiving it (Kahf, 2006, p. 107).

My research has lead me to various different conclusions about the way menstruation is viewed in Arab and Arab-American communities. In novels, memoirs, and coming of age stories, if menstruation is discussed, it is understood through the topic of development and pregnancy. The examples of development seen in these narratives describe a girl progressing to a young woman. Through pregnancy it is described simply as, if blood is present then you are not pregnant, and if there is an absence of blood, then they are pregnant. On the other hand, the scholarly work around menstruation has led us to believe that it is a "curse", "shameful", and focused on female genital mutilation. This has driven my interest in speaking with Arab and

Arab-Americans, to gain a better understanding of how menstruating individuals view their own periods.

Chapter 3 - Conversations of Menstruation

Our Mother Hava (Eve) said: I, your grandmother, who loves you even though you are yet unborn except in my hopes, tell you: Verily, your period is not a curse but a blessing. It is one of the Signs of God, so learn to read it. -
Mohja Kahf (2010)

In this chapter, I will be focusing on my conversations to gain an understanding of my participant's knowledge of menstruation prior to menstruating, discussions of menstruation at home, rituals and practices, and silence around menstruation. I have aimed to recount my conversations with my participants to allow the reader to fully engage in our conversations. I have reflected on the conversations and offer different questions to understand how each person views their own cycle.

Knowledge of menstruation prior to menstruating:

I start with prior knowledge in order to understand what, when, how, and by whom my participants are receiving this information. Analyzing each individual's rituals and practices will lay a foundation for understanding if practices have been passed down from one generation to the next. It can also give us an understanding into how and if, Arab-Americans have developed their own rituals and practices that combine the two cultures they represent.

Ghazala is first generation Jordanian-American, who was born and raised in the United States. She comes from a family of seven, with four brothers and herself, being the only girl her parents had. *My mom took the time to talk to me about my period when I was 10 years old. She described my period theoretically, telling me that I will become a woman one day soon, where I*

will be fully responsible for myself and my sins in the eyes of Allah [God]. Ghazala remembers this conversation based on religious principles and facts that many Muslims believe signifies a girl becoming a young adult. I asked Ghazala if she remembers any conversation based around what will happen to her physically during this transition in life. "I don't remember any specific conversation about that, but I also don't remember being scared or not knowing what to do. So I guess I must have had it at some point or learned from a friend." While she may not remember the specific conversation, it is important to note that she was not shocked or afraid when she did receive her first menses.

Heba is first generation Iraqi-American who has lived a majority of her life in the United States. Heba comes from a family of five, with one brother and one sister. *When I was nine years old my mom said to me, "This will happen to you one day."* Heba wishes that she could remember exactly what her mom said to her, but she remembers this talk. *My best friend got it a year before I got mine so I knew what to expect. She used to call me and tell me what it was like. So I was prepared when I got mine at 11 or 12.*

When I asked Heba what she meant by, *"This will happen to you one day"*, Heba described her mom discussing what it meant religiously and the physical changes her body will be going through. An interesting point, there was no shame discussing periods amongst friends, *"It was pretty TMI [too much information], but that's what we discussed as young teenagers. She wanted to tell me about her period and I wanted to hear about this process."* At the time of this conversation, I did not think to ask Heba what did she feel and why did she feel it was too much information.

Listening to Heba, it sounded like she learned most about her period through her friends experience so I asked her where did she feel she learned the most about her period. *"I see it as*

my mom giving me an introductory course into it and my friend giving me all the details.” Heba goes into a list of things her mother talked to her about which included pain she might feel, how to use a menstruation pad, and how often to change it. On the contrary, with her friend they discussed how long it lasted, smells, and different emotions they were feeling.

Yasmin is an immigrant from Jordan who moved to the United States in the late 1970s with her husband and two children. Yasmin came from a family of seven, with three sisters and two brothers. She is also the mother of Ghazala whom I was able to hold separate conversations with on their experiences. *“I came from a period of time when women did not discuss periods with their family members, not even amongst women. So when I got mine, I knew nothing about it. I came out and told my mom to call a doctor for me, since I was bleeding in a place where I did not hurt myself.”*

Yasmin recounts an immediate and visceral reaction to seeing blood for the first time indicating that she received her first period. Yasmin describes alarm at seeing blood for the first time in a place where she had not injured herself. She said she was used to seeing blood on her knees or hands, but not between her legs. *“I ran to my mother to tell her about the blood and that was when she said that it was usual for a girl to bleed there.”* Yasmin said her mom handed her a cloth and told her how to wrap it to catch the blood.

In December 2015, BBC interviewed a woman named Amy Peake who recently became interested in the hygiene needs of menstruating refugees, specifically from Syria. Peake simultaneously discovered a man in India that invented a machine that made sanitary napkins at low prices and with local goods. She decided to bring this machine to Syrian refugee camps, so this would no longer be an issue for the women. The article recounts an interaction she had with

one young woman in the camp, *“One 13-year-old giggles throughout the discussion, but then is eager to share her big secret - she, too, has had her first period. It happened at school. ‘I went to the teacher and told her what happened and she explained that it's physical changes and it's normal for a girl,’ she says.”*

This article, the author, the translator, and Peake indicates that this girl knew nothing about menstruation prior to receiving her first period. Instead her teacher explains menarche to her as, *“Physical changes and it's normal for a girl”*. Since we are receiving this information through at least two sources, the interpreter and the author of the article, we cannot be sure if anything more was said between the girl and her teacher. We also cannot be sure if this girl actually knew nothing about her period before receiving it. However, I do feel it is important to note if this girl actually knew nothing of periods, this may be true due to the natures of war and precedence of topics of discussions.

Huda was the first immigrant woman that I was able to speak with on her experiences of menstruation that was over the age of 40 years old. Huda moved to the United States in 1990, after living back and forth between the United States, Iraq, and Jordan for the previous 10 years. *“I grew up in Iraq in the 1970s, in a secular family with very little religious training, as that was not the custom or focus during that time. My mom had told me that I would get my period and it was a normal process for every girl. I ask, “Do you remember around what age she had that discussion with you?” “I do not remember what age my mother discussed this with me. But I also have two older sisters who I grew up very close to and discussed this with them.”*

From this conversation I had wondered why it was important for Huda to mention that she came from a secular family, so I asked her more about this. Huda responded stating, *“The way I understood my period was through bodily changes and not from a religious perspective.”*

This was the first time I was coming across a story that did not revolve around religious rituals and meanings to describe these changes. This was also my first narrative that seemed to describe learning about this experience through her close siblings.

Huda did continue on with saying, *“It was different when I had my first daughter, I taught her about it from a religious point of view.”* I asked her more about this and why she felt it was important to discuss it with her daughter from that point of view. *“It’s not that I didn’t understand or appreciate how my mom discussed it with me, but I wanted to discuss it in terms that was important to me. Later in life I became religious, the most religious in my family, and it was more important to me for her to know what it means Islamically and not just physically.”* Faith is what drove Huda to teach her daughter, Heba, about menstruation through this lens. This was not where Huda stopped though, she also described the physical changes that would accompany the faith transition, like her mother did with her.

When I first approached Azzizah about speaking to her about my project, she looked and laughed at me saying, *“Back home we never talk about this.”* Nevertheless, she was still interested in speaking to me and telling me about her experience growing up in Iraq. Azzizah was and born and raised in Iraq with one sister and two brothers. Her and her entire family immigrated to the United States in the mid-1970s.

“I knew nothing about my period before I got it. I don’t remember how old I was when I got it, but one day I went to the bathroom and saw that I had blood on my clothes. I was really scared and freaked out by what I saw. I went to my aunt and made her promise me that she will not tell anyone what I am about to tell her. After she promised me, I told her that I was pregnant. My aunt says, ‘Okay ... whose baby is it?’ I said, ‘I don’t know! I have no idea!’ My aunt finally

asks, *'Why do you think you are pregnant?'* I said, *'Because I have blood on my clothes!'* My aunt looked so relieved and said, *'You are crazy girl! You are supposed to be bleeding, this happens to every woman.'*

Here we have another example of when someone reacts in a scared manner to the bleeding they have found on their clothes. As of now, the women that I have had conversations with that did not have any knowledge of menstruation prior to menstruating reacted with fear. Additionally, they both have been immigrant women, up until this point. On the other hand, this is the first mention of pregnancy in relation to menstruation that has come up in my conversations. I asked Azzizah why did she think she was pregnant and she said she did not know but she knew it was something she could not tell her mother.

Reflecting back on that conversation, I wish I had asked her if she was more afraid of seeing the blood or thinking she was pregnant. Azzizah chose a family member that she felt she could trust and confide in to help her if she was pregnant. I wonder if Azzizah has heard more about pregnancy than periods while growing up that led her to believe she herself was pregnant?

Lena is a Palestinian immigrant who grew up primarily in Palestine, but moved to Jordan in her teenage years, with seven other siblings. Lena immigrated to the United States with a few family members in the 1980s, where she met her husband, and later had five children. *"When I got my period, I thought I was dying. I had seen blood before growing up in a refugee camp in Jordan and I thought that was happening to me."* Lena describes growing up in a refugee camp made blood a typical site to see. I asked Lena what did she feel when she saw it and did she go talk to anyone? *"I tried to find my mom, but she was not home then. I went to one of my sisters and told her what I had seen. She hugged me, told me I wasn't dying, and told me what to do."*

Lena could not remember what specific feelings she had at that time. I asked her if she felt any sort of relief, happiness, or even joy when her sister told her she was not dying. She said, *“I did feel better when my sister told me I wasn’t dying. I wasn’t ready to die because mama [mom] wasn’t home.”* Lena explained that she does not remember much beyond that because she became preoccupied with learning how to use menstrual pads and cloths.

In my conversations with menstruating individuals, I have encountered a variety of diverse responses, something that I did not expect. Menstruation has not been referred to as a taboo topic, and if my participants classify it as such, it has not inhibited our conversations. In the next section, I will aim to discover if my participants view menstruation as taboo, through understanding how they speak of the topic at home.

Discussions of menstruation at home:

My aunt calls her period “intifal” [a celebration]. - Heba

As Heba describes this alternative word for menstruation that her aunt has created, she is laughing. I ask her to tell me more about it, and her response is, *“This is the code word that we [the women in the family] use to discuss our periods.”* I wish I asked her more about her feelings around calling it *“A celebration,”* and if she ever really felt that way. I wondered if this word was created to freely discuss periods in presence of men, without making them uncomfortable or hiding the discussion in plain sight of the men? I also wondered if this was a word only used in the presence of women only. In any case, the creation of a positive synonym to discuss menstruation, is of significant importance.

Why does one choose a positive word to represent a taboo subject, as many scholars have lead us to believe menstruation has been regarded as in the Middle East? I believe changing attitudes and education have lead many people with periods to challenge these ideas and norms. Later in my conversation with Heba, she tells me that she used to get excited about getting her period because it meant that she could do some things that she could not do before, such as painting her nails. This sentiment was similarly expressed by other Muslims that I interviewed and even recounted in the novels and memoirs I read. However, many of them either no longer find such excitement in those activities, or they treat their periods as very matter of fact.

Since my mother discussed periods with me when I was a child, I want to do the same for my daughter, so that she understands what would happen to her the day when it comes. - Heba

When I have daughters, I will explain periods to them the same way my mother talked about it with me. - Ghazala

Both Heba and Ghazala have mothers that discussed menarche with them through Islamic rituals around the same age, nine or ten years old. *“I found it easy to understand what my mom was telling me and if she tried to explain the biology to me, I wouldn’t have understood that at such a young age,”* said Heba. Additionally, they both have had a positive experience of prior knowledge of menstruation that they would repeat what their mothers did for them, for their daughters.

My mother did not discuss periods with me and I was so scared and shocked when I received mine, I decided that I wanted to discuss the importance of it for a girl Islamically. When my only daughter turned 10 years old, I told her that she will be becoming a woman one day, will need to begin wearing hijab [scarf], and will be fully responsible for yourself and your sins under Allah [God]. - Yasmin

Earlier we explored Yasmin’s story of her first experience with menstruation. Here, Yasmin is recounting the reasons why she chose to speak with her daughter about her period, *“I did not want my daughter to begin wearing hijab [scarf] until she had her first period, and I*

explained this to her. I knew she was excited and ready to begin wearing one, but I wanted to make sure she understood everything about her period first and the Islamic rules.” Earlier in our conversation, Yasmin was telling me she did not understand why some Islamic rituals only appeared after a certain time, until she had her first cycle. I then asked her if this was the reason why she chose to explain it through Islamic practices, and she said, *“I want my children to understand Islam fully.”*

Noor is a first generation Syrian-American, who was born and raised in the United States. *“In my household menstruation is not talked about. That is why, I think, I was able to hide it for so long.”* She began describing how upsetting it was that she had to hide her period. I asked her why did she feel she needed to hide it? *“I felt this was a secret that I should keep because my mom would not want to know about this. I also felt that I could not approach her about this, like there was this bag of topics not to discuss.”*

Most importantly, Noor confided in me that she was not ready for the religious duties that her parents believed she had to follow once she received it. *“My parents are very religious and I knew that once I received it, I was expected to leave my room with my hijab [scarf] on, and that would mark that I have received my period to them.”* Noor described the activation of religious practices differently than any other person I had spoken to so far. She described how these practices had been taught to her independently, however there was an expectation to begin these practices to signify her transition from a child to a young adult. The expectancy she faced to leave her room with her scarf developed from, *“I don’t remember any specific conversation on hijab, but there was this underlying expectation from my parents, who valued hijab.”* Noor mentioned later in our conversation that her expectancy to wear hijab was reinforced when she

started seventh grade, and was forced to wear hijab, though according to her parents, had not known that she received her period yet.

Tahani is a Palestinian-American who was born and raised in the United States. She was raised primarily by her mother and four older siblings, because her father died when she was three years old. When speaking with Tahani, I had a feeling this conversation was going to be different than the others I have had so far. This feeling, that set Tahani apart from the others, came from her forward and forthcoming personality, which gave me a feeling that we were going to discuss menstruation differently. With Tahani spoke about the subject like an everyday matter, something that I felt was not apparent with the others, even though they were willing to speak to me.

“We always talked about our periods open and freely throughout my entire life. My mom and sisters were very open about theirs. I am the same way, in fact my oldest brother always used to help me when my period came. He asked me if I needed anything, brought me medicine, and a heating pad.” I was shocked by this account because I have never heard of this happening before, members of the opposite sex involved in daily menstrual care! *“But at the same time, my other brother wished we wouldn’t speak about it so much and in so much detail.”* Tahani laughs as she recounts this and states, *“That won’t be happening.”* I wanted to ask Tahani more about her older brother, and more about how he was involved in her care. It seemed the conversation ended here due to her sudden silence after mentioning her brother. I was not sure I should push her to speak about her brother, since he had been murdered a few months ago, so I did not question her any further.

In this section, I continue to be surprised at the responses I have received from my participants. They continue to display a variety of responses, and the most startling response was from Heba, and her family, who use a positive word to describe their period. My conversations, up until this point, have exhibited very little evidence to support menstruation being taboo in the Arab and Arab-American population.

Rituals and Practices of Menstruation:

The rituals and practices section of this chapter will explore Arab and Arab-American practices. The importance of this section is to not only document rituals and practices from the Levant, but also as another means to explore the idea of menstruation being taboo. Certain practices can indicate if a topic is truly taboo. Clifford Geertz (1973) states that cultures are disciplines that provide codes and social scripts for the domestication of the individual body.

“I could no longer ride a bike when I started my period. My mother would freak out when I wanted to ride my bike.” - Ghazala

While I had some inclination as to why Ghazala’s mother forbid her to ride a bike, I ask Ghazala about why she thinks her mom reacted that way. Ghazala responds that she believes it has to do with her maintaining her virginity. In fact, when she visited her family doctor prior to her marriage, her doctor said to her, *“I can’t wait until you get married so I can properly examine you then.”*

Susan is Lebanese who immigrated to the United States at the age of 18. Since her immigration she has lived primarily in the United States, but did briefly live in Germany for two years with the intention of moving back to Lebanon with her new husband. After two years in Germany, her and her husband separated and she immigrated back to the United States with her only child. At the age of 25, Susan was back in the United States and here she learned of a new custom in the American culture, and that was of showering while on your period. *“You never shower while on your period. The cold water could cause you to become sick and possibly prevent pregnancy.”*

I asked Susan more about this practice and she told me that all the women in her family used to do this. Once her mother knew she had received her period, she instructed her to not shower and instead wait till she was done with her period to take one long, purifying bath. I asked Susan if she ever questioned this practice, and she told me she did not.

“When I was in the United States, I learned that women did shower.” In Susan’s attempts at full immersion into the American culture, she adopted this practice, *“I was now American and I wanted to be like the other American women.”* I asked Susan where she learned that American women were showering while on their periods, but she could not remember if it was through conversation or through a movie.

On the other hand, when Susan’s daughter had her first period, she taught her daughter not to shower as well. I asked, *“Why was it important for you to pass on this ritual?”* Susan responded with, *“My daughter was young and I wanted to make sure she could become pregnant and be healthy. For myself, I was older, divorced, and not going to have kids anymore, so it was ok for me to take showers.”*

Suha Al-Oballi Kridli (2002) writes about this same practice in her brief guide on *Health Practices and Beliefs of Arab Women*, “Out of fear of increasing menstrual pain and cramping Arab American women believe that a woman should not shower until the end of her menstrual period” (p. 2). In reading her guide and speaking with people about their practices, I believe Kridli is inter changing the word Arab and Arab-American, because none of the Arab-Americans I have spoken to have practiced this. On the other hand, when speaking to Arab immigrants, this was something they either practiced or have heard of people in their generation practicing.

When speaking to Heba about her rituals and practices she said, “*It was so confusing because some people were telling me not to shower and then others were telling me I must shower. These mixed messages were very confusing.*” I asked how Heba decided which practice to follow and she said she just did what she wanted to do, if she wanted to shower then she would, if she did not then she did not. “*My mother did not hold any particular opinion on showering, so I could make up my own mind on what I wanted to do.*”

“*My activities for the day were around my period.*” Azizah began telling me about what her days were like in her thirties and forties in the United States. “*I would not leave the house when I was on the first two days of my period. I knew that my period would ruin the whole day, so I refused to do anything on those days. My family respected that and changed their schedules around to accommodate me.*” I asked, “How would your period ruin the whole day?” Azizah believed that the first two days of your period were for resting and taking care of yourself. If she did not rest during those first two days, then her period would be heavy, painful, and messy. I told Azizah that I liked the idea of taking the first two days to rest for yourself. It has become normalized for menstruating people to act as if our bodies are not going through any changes and hide the pain we are feeling. I continued to ask Azizah what activities were changed around, and

she indicated that they were daily activities, such as going to lunch or shopping. She based some even larger events around her period, like her marriage and her brother's marriage dates!

“When my mom found out that I got my period, she immediately called all of her friends and told them about it.” - Lena

“I didn't tell my mom about my period because I knew she was going to tell everyone [her friends]. My sister told her about a year later and my mom started calling everyone up. I told her to not tell anyone and that was embarrassing and that is why I didn't tell her when I first got mine. I knew I wouldn't be able to stop her from telling her friends.” - Tahani

Both Lena and Tahani described similar stories of their mother sharing the information that their daughters received their period to their friends. I believe this indicates a joyous occasion, because when someone takes the time to call their friends about something specific, holds importance. When Lena was telling me the story of when her mother started calling all of her friends, when she was a young girl, she expressed no shame in it. *“This was a normal thing to do. I did not mind it. It was something to be proud of as a woman, and it showed that a mother has raised a healthy family. I did the same thing when my daughters got theirs; I called all of my friends.”*

Lena speaks of a theme I have come across in scholarly literature and novels, Palestinian women are seen as guardians of national, cultural, and the family (Keddie, 2007, p. 100). “Blood is a nearly universal symbol of human life, and some people, both ancient and contemporary, have tested the quality of the blood, pulse, and circulation, as the primary diagnostic sign of health or illness” (Sargent & Johnson, 1947, p. 55). Lena describes conversations about menstruation, between Palestinian women, as an indicator of health for not only their daughters, but their entire family.

On the other hand, Tahani knew her mother would call all of her friends immediately after she told her she had her first cycle. In fact, that is the reason why she decided to keep it

from her mom. Tahani tells me, *“This is a personal matter and I don’t want my mom’s friends knowing all of my personal business. I don’t mind that my family knows and I like that we speak about it openly, but I want to choose who I tell.”* Tahani describes a desire for control around her own body and control over who knows what is going on with it.

“Around the time when I knew my period was coming, I wouldn’t eat or drink any cold foods because they can increase your pain during your period. And when I had pain in my lower stomach and back, my mom used to boil mint and thyme in water for me to drink, to help with the pain.” - Lena

Drinking herbal teas, to ease the pain of menstrual cramps, was a practice that I believed would have come up more often in my conversations with the immigrant women. Yet, this was not the case, as Lena was the only one who mentioned this practice. I asked her if she does this for her daughters now, or taught them this practice and she said, *“I have done it a few times for them and they know how to do it for themselves. But I never did it as much for them as my mom did for me.”* I wanted to know more about why this practice was not kept up in the family and Lena had a very simple explanation, *“We used to grow our own mint and thyme, and we had so much of it all year. Here we cannot keep those plants alive and sometimes dried thyme cannot be found.”* Lena explains the difference in the climates found in Palestine, mild winters and hot summers, to the climate where she is living now, cold winters and mild summers. On top of that, there is a lack of Arabic supermarkets in the town where she is living, so gaining access to those materials is more difficult. In fact, due to the distance of the closest Arabic store, they rarely visit an Arabic supermarket.

After talking to Lena, I was curious if Tahani, her daughter, made herbal teas, the way her mom showed her, on her own. *“My mom made me the tea once and I guess it did help. She used to tell me that I needed to drink this before I ever took any medicine. I don’t drink the tea, the first thing I reach for when I have pain is some acetaminophen.”* I asked Tahani if she made

her own tea and she said she just drank the tea bags, mainly mint and chamomile tea, occasionally.

Suha Al-Oballi Kridli (2002) discusses health practices followed by Arab women and indicates that, “Western medications are only used if herbs are not strong enough for the pain” (p. 2). Access to materials is limited for the Arab and Arab-American communities, which could have possibly lead a decrease in this practice. If your entire surrounding community does not have the same practices, how likely are those practices to be upheld?

Overall, the only ritual practice discussed was *ghusul*, since all of my participants have been Muslim. *Ghusul*, is the ritual purification cleansing of the body after your period has ceased. The intention is to be ritually cleansed and make your intention to begin praying again. Many Muslims believe that people who are menstruating cannot pray due to the inability to keep *wudu*, a ritual wash that must be completed before each prayer. In Islam, there are a few things that will break your *wudu* and those are sex, using the bathroom, and bleeding. Therefore, if one is bleeding they cannot keep *wudu*, and therefore menstruating people cannot pray. This is the primary view held by many Muslims, and these beliefs have held true to my participants.

In conclusion, I am again challenged in my beliefs of menstruation being taboo. In fact, many of the rituals and practices that have been described above, displays a menstruating person, to the outside world. This can range from a more verbal pronouncement, such as a proud mother calling her friends, to a more subtle practice, of making a special tea. Next, I will explore the idea of silence around menstruation, to continue to explore the notion of menstruation being taboo.

“Silence” Around Menstruation:

The purpose of this section is to explore the idea of silence around menstruation. I will focus on what my participants choose to share with me about with whom, and when they speak of menstruation. I have included the quotation marks around silence to further the question of, is there really silence around menstruation in Arab and Arab-American communities? If there is a silence around it, what are they silent about and why? Lastly, does this silence contribute to menstruation being taboo?

“My dad did not know when I got my first period and to this day I haven't said anything to him, nor has my mom. We act as if we don't have it - during Ramadan [the Islamic month of fasting] we still get up and eat suhoor [meal before sunrise], with the whole family, even when we are on our [mom and sister] period. During Ramadan, we just eat small snacks in the privacy of our own room. We don't eat a big meal or prepare anything in the kitchen when we aren't fasting.” - Heba

I introduced Heba earlier in my paper as someone who was well versed in periods. It is evident from that portion of the conversation Heba was speaking about periods for several years, preceding her first cycle, with her mother and best friend. Here, Heba described, at no time in the past has she discussed her cycles with her father and brother. In fact, they go to some lengths to hide the fact that they are menstruating, when religious doctrine has given them a pardon from certain religious practices, for the duration of their cycle.

Reflecting back on this conversation, I wish I would have asked Heba more about what other circumstances do they, “*Act as if we don't have it*”, because I feel Ramadan is a unique time. Ramadan is a holy month, filled with special religious practices that are generally not practiced at any other point in the year. Actually, many menstruating people partake in these daily religious practices due to the importance this month holds for Muslims. Therefore, I find

this situation unique, and understandable that menstruating people would want to continue to practice these different acts of faith. If I continued to ask Heba more about this, I would have had a better understanding of when the women of the family concealed their periods. Since I did not, and from the information I have, I believe this does not indicate a “silence” around their menstruating bodies.

Throughout our conversation, Heba has mentioned that her family pushes for their children to interpret Islam for themselves. Additionally, Heba had described a few beliefs she once used to hold, and how those beliefs have evolved through time. For example, many Muslims hold the belief that wearing nail polish invalidates your prayer. This is why many Muslim women wear nail polish only while they are on their periods, because they are not praying during this time. Heba questioned those beliefs and has come to the conclusion of, *“That is false.”* She has experienced nothing but support from her parents, which leads me to believe that if Heba wanted to not participate in suhoor one morning during Ramadan, then she would not have to.

“I do not discuss periods with my family, only my mother, because I do not want to make them [father and brothers] uncomfortable, and it’s about respecting them.” - Ghazala

Ghazala speaks about respect, creating comfort, and “silence” surrounding her menstruating body, around her family. Ghazala uses the word family to describe her father and six brothers, but this does not include her mother. *“When I was a teenager I did not want to make my brothers and father uncomfortable with the discussion, so I didn’t have it with them.”*

However, since everyone is now older, her brothers have an open relationship with their mother and they can ask her anything. I ask Ghazala more about this, and she said that it is because everyone is now around the age to be married, and her parents want them to know more

about women's bodies. I wanted to know if her brothers ever approached her about this, *"No, they all go to my mother for questions. My husband asks me about it all the time since he knew very little about it before we got married."*

With Ghazala, there was a period of time when she was only speaking with her mother and female friends about her period. However, as her brothers neared the age of marriage this became a topic of open discussion within the household. Again, does this indicate a complete "silence" around menstruation in Arab and Arab-American households?

"I started attending public school in 7th grade and I was in a health class that year. Some time during the semester we had to take home these permission slips to have our parents sign that gave their consent for their children to receive sex education. My mom refused to sign the slip and I was the only student who was not allowed to attend that week's lesson. I was very upset with her for not allowing me to attend. And I was so embarrassed to hand my teacher the slip and walk back in that classroom the week after the lesson had been given." - Noor

I asked Noor to talk to me a little more about this particular experience and she went on to tell me, that she remembered feeling embarrassed to ask her mom to sign a permission slip that stated she could be taught sex education. *"Actually, I don't remember if the actual words were sex education on the slip, but I knew it was sex education and male and female reproductive systems that were going to be discussed that week."* Noor described this topic as being very taboo at home, but she hoped that her mom would consent to it, after all she was interested in becoming a doctor in the future. I wanted to know more about Noor's reaction to the lack of permission for this lesson, but Noor could not recall much of what happened, except for she did try a little to push her mom to change her mind. *"I didn't push the subject that much because I knew not to discuss this and I didn't want her to think I wanted to have sex."*

I understood what Noor was saying here, as I have had the same experience, but I wanted to hear more about what she felt this meant and how it led to her mother's decision. *"There is this fear, that Arabs hold, that once children learn about sex they will want to have sex. But what*

is funny about that, is they never teach you how to have sex! They only teach you the anatomy of sex organs, pregnancy, and safe sex practices.” Is it possible that sex is something that should not be taught or learned in a formal manner, rather it should be earned through conversations with other women and experience?

So what did Noor do during the week that her class was learning about sexual education? *“I had to go and sit in the other health teacher’s classroom that week and do the work that they were doing. This other health teacher had said to me, “I wish you were in my classroom because I would have forced your mother to have this lesson. Plus, it would probably have helped that I am a woman.”* Noor’s health education teacher was a man, whom her mother did meet during Parent Teacher conference night earlier in the year. As Noor is revisiting these memories, she does admit that her teacher was probably right in a sense, her mother may have been more comfortable with her taking a sexual education lesson from a woman rather than a man. Unfortunately, this was not an option for Noor at the time.

Noor’s experience of denial of sex education in public school could have been due to several factors, but I did not have the opportunity to speak to her mother. However, I feel it is more important for us to analyze the topic of “silence” in this case. At the beginning of our conversation, Noor recounted to me the first time she was introduced to the topic of development in fourth grade. By that time, she had already received her period, and now had the women’s development and education lecture, by a person her mother deemed significant enough to hold that conversation with her. Next, *“I had one conversation with my grandmother on menstruation as I was growing up and that was around using menstrual pads and not tampons.”* From these different conversations Noor had while growing up, it is possible that her mother believed her

daughter to be fully educated on the subject. Additionally, while few and sporadic, these different conversations do not indicate the presumed silence around menstruation.

“She hasn't told her mother yet - perhaps because once a girl has had a period she's considered an adult, and no longer allowed to play outside.” - BBC Unlikely Sanitary Pad article

Again, we are visiting the 13 year old girl living in a refugee camp where a British woman has brought a machine that will make menstrual pads for the women at a very low cost. The translator, author, and British woman make an assumption about this girl to suggest why this girl has made the decision not to tell her mother. I raise questions as to why this girl has not told her mother, could there potentially be a taboo around menarche and she may not know how to bring it up? Or she could have decided to hide the fact that her period came because she knows it will be an additional stress added on to her family, who is currently living in a refugee camp? The article highlights the stress women face in dealing with their periods, because of the lack of menstrual hygiene materials, therefore this could be an additional stress to obtain the needed materials for her periods. It is also possible that the 13 year old girl treats it as an everyday practice and does not see the need in bringing it up.

Earlier, I mentioned my conversation with Tahani who discussed how her older brother helped her through her cycle. On the other hand, she mentioned her other brother's reaction to his family's discussion of periods, which I believe it worth mentioning again, *“We speak about it so openly and in detail at home. My eldest brother didn't care, but my other brother wishes we wouldn't speak about it in so much detail. He finds it disgusting.”*

Mentioning Tahani's story again, along with Heba, Ghazala, and Noor's, we can begin to analyze what silence means in this context. I must admit, this was personally hard for me to understand, and without the guidance of my advisor I would not have made this connection. "A subject that is talked about partially (for instance among girls, between daughters and mothers, but not with brothers and fathers) cannot be called a taboo subject. Why should one talk about everything with everybody?" (A. Najmabadi, personal communication, January 4, 2016). In the next chapter, I will continue to analyze my participant's statements, and reframe our perceptions of menstruating Arab and Arab-Americans.

Chapter 4 - Reframing the Bloody Hell

Maududi claims I cannot count change or think straight during menses. May God reincarnate him as a tampon for spreading such half-truths and disrespecting women's bodies and minds. - Mohja Kahf (2010)

When I began this thesis, I was searching for the reasons why menstruation is taboo among Arab and Arab-Americans. After all, that was the experience I had. This thesis gave me the opportunity to explore this, and I found that was not the case with the people I have spoken to. Menstruation is, in fact, widely discussed among women, their daughters, and their friends.

Another view I held was, shame around their menstruating bodies. I have grown up around stories about how periods should be hidden, because it is unclean and repulsive. General domination of such statements persists in our minds, "Oh God. I now know, without the shred of a doubt, the true source of all evil in the world: menstrual blood" (Abdulhamid, 2001, p. 8). These stories are easy to internalize, and I must admit, I did for a period of time. However, the people I have spoken to have provided narratives that contradict this view. Actually, they have displayed no such language or practices.

So what does that mean in regards to reframing the scholarly and personal stigma held towards Arab and Arab-Americans? In my efforts to reframe the bloody hell, I have narrated my conversations with menstruating individuals. My intention is to present their experiences, rituals, and understandings, so I can aim to combat the negative connotation around Arab and Arab-American individuals.

Unfortunately, there is old scholarly, and some present, research that continues a negative perception of non-Western societies, "Anthropologists continue to question the origins of female initiation rites. The prevailing view is that, like the taboos against the menstruating woman, the rites are devised and perpetrated by men on women, for in no known society have women ever

achieved positions of power significant enough to place them in control of these vitally important religious ceremonies” (Delaney, Lupton, & Toth, 1976). My conversations with people from the Levant, provide an alternative, these menstruating individuals hold all rites, rituals, and practice power. The individuals have shown their desire to control who knows about the changes in their body. An example of this was seen in the case of Heba, who continues to control who knows when she is menstruating, most specifically, while at home.

Current scholarly research has been limited due to, “I can remember that studying women in the Middle East as a scholarly topic was not only very rare, but also considered second-class and of little interest” (Keddie, 2007, p. 228). It does not help that we continue to see articles that continue a negative narrative of Arab and Arab-Americans surrounding menstruation. Most recently, Jenan Matari (2015) posted a piece titled, “A Bleeding Battle: The Syrian Refugee Women’s Issue No One is Talk About” on Muslimgirl.net. Throughout the article negative language, such as, “Cruelness from mother nature,” “P.M.S. Hell,” “Unhealthy amount of blood,” and “Endure” were used to describe menstruating Syrians.

Mythri Speaks is a Trust, working on creating awareness of menstrual hygiene practices across India. They have created a short film and online blog around questions they were asked by young girls, while doing their work. Quickly, they have encountered, “A dismissal of cultural practices around menstruation, calling them menstrual taboos.” As Mythri Speaks began discovering the history and meanings behind menstrual practices in India, they have encountered many positive aspects to these practices. I bring in this important realization, because I believe this holds true for the individuals I have spoken to. A cultural practice is the discussion of menstruation generally only among others who share this experience, and this has been

interpreted as a silence, a shame, a taboo to mention. This has been reflected in my literature review primarily in my scholarly research.

Menstruation is generally not discussed with men, however in the example of Tahani, that is not the case. In my research, Tahani holds the minority experience, and thus I would like to explore the majority experience a little further. Fatima Mernissi (1991) describes control of women as, “misogyny in danger” (p. 144). Mernissi (1991) continues with, “Harmful religious translations have been used as excuses to keep menstruation and menstruating individuals dominated” (p.144). The discussion of misogyny in danger is very valuable, but I believe there is an additional explanation to the majority experience. Menstruating individuals may not speak with non-menstruating people, because it is not an experience they share, and therefore conversations around it could be very limited.

Many of the historical tribes of the Levant, such as the Bedouins, were hunter-gathers and a semi-nomadic tribe. From these hunter-gatherer tribes, culture is one of the defining characteristics from one tribe to another. Each ritual and practice holds significant meaning to most in the tribe. My research did not lead to a distinction between practices and rituals between countries or immigrant mothers and their children, first generation Arab-Americans. I did learn there was a combination of practices from both the Levant and the United States, learned by immigrant mothers, a majority of the time.

I believed that I would encounter more traditional practices among immigrant women, however, many of them no longer maintain these practices while residing in the United States. It is possible that I could have encountered more rituals and practices if I had the chance to speak to more grandmothers. As for the Arab-Americans, the only traditional practice they hold, is *ghusul*. Again, I thought I would encounter more practices, but instead that was not the case.

“Biculturalism provides both, access to alternative lifestyles, and the means to achieve them” (Accad, 1993 p. 233). These individuals knew of multiple cultural practices that they could apply, if they chose, to their practices. I believed this would be more evident in Arab-Americans who grow up in a multicultural environment, but it was also evident in the immigrant population. We see this in the story Susan told us, the practice of not showering while on her period. After she immigrated to the U.S., she learned a different practice, and adopted it. When Susan’s daughter received her period she taught her the practice of not showering. Since they live in the U.S., Susan’s daughter will be exposed to other practices and possibly may make a different decision in her life.

On a personal level, I hypothesized that menstruation was taboo, because there is a lack of understanding what was happening, biologically to the body. I thought the lack of formal education was influencing a large group of people in keeping menstruation taboo. The Arab-American individuals I have spoken to, have appreciated the way menstruation was discussed with them at a young age. As a matter of fact, Heba said to me, *“I would not have wanted a biology talk at that age. I wouldn’t have understood it. I think waiting until 7th grade to have that lesson is better, because you can understand it better.”* Understanding the meaning of menstruation from a faith, and a matter of everyday experience was highly valued. “I realized that most women who follow menstrual rituals are not concerned with modern science’s outlook. For most women, it is reverence to an age old belief system that they want to be keepers of” (Mythri Speaks, 2015).

What practices are still upheld in the Levant, and why? Why did old practices die out? Where did these old practices come from? Does the Levant stand out in their perspective on menstruation? This could possibly be true, but no such conclusion could be made until research

is performed in different areas of the Middle East to understand how cultures have provided different frameworks for shaping understandings of menstruation.

Epilogue

I entered this thesis with a strong belief that speaking about menstruation is taboo among the Arab and Arab-American population. This was a hypothesis that I developed from my own personal experience as a menstruating Arab-American. This in turn, has reflected on my research methods, by inhibiting my ability to adjust my research accordingly, when I found my research did not support my hypothesis. Additionally, when speaking to Arab-Americans about my research topic, outside of my participant group, one person said to me, *“What do you want to know about periods being taboo? Because, I can tell you that it is a taboo topic. You don’t have to do any research on it. We don’t talk about it.”* This response was not an uncommon response from many Arab-Americans, who could not understand why I would complete any research on a topic we already know as being taboo.

From these responses, my research came from the desire to have a conversation with my participants about menstruation. I wanted them to lead the conversation, and tell me what they felt was most important to them. I did develop a list of questions for two purposes, first, for IRB approval, as I had to present a general list of questions that I may ask the participants. This was needed in order to gauge the sensitivity of the questions and topics that may be discussed by the IRB board. Second, I predicted that I would be speaking with some strangers or acquaintances, who may be discussing this for the first time. Therefore, they may not feel comfortable taking the lead.

I found that in most of my conversations, my participants expected me to take the lead, and ask them specific questions. I was not prepared for this kind of question and answer session, for I knew it was going to lead to a specific conclusion. Through the interviews, I began with a few questions, then off of the responses to those questions, I asked additional questions from

there. This worked sometimes, and others it was not always possible. The questions and the details I asked them to elaborate on, was influenced by my strong hypothesis that menstruation is taboo. Therefore, I did not ask them to elaborate on other points that may have challenged the notion of menstruation being taboo.

For future research, it is important for me to stop, and reflect on my positionality. Stopping and reflecting more on what my participants have said, and how it affects my research was needed, and I did not do that as often as I should have. This was lacking the most in my conversations, because it influenced the direction our conversations went. When reflecting back on my conversations, I noted where I could have asked more questions or clarifications. Due to the limitations of this research, I made space for only one conversation with each individual, lasting two hours in length.

Reflecting on the limitations of this research, almost all of the individuals that I have spoken to for this project are friends, or my family. Using my personal contact group and family brings a certain perspective and angle to this study, because the time and places I have developed these friendships imply specific context. Of the first generation Arab-Americans I spoke to, three out of the four people were college graduates, and currently seeking a professional degree. None of the immigrant mothers or grandmothers were college graduates.

All of the people I have spoken to for this thesis, identified with being Muslim, in one form or another. Not all of them are from the Sunni denomination however, it still speaks towards a limitation of this research. It was not my intention to only have conversations with Muslims, as I made sure my alternative readings and analysis included people from other faiths.

Another major limitation of this thesis, is the number of participants and conversations. With such a large Arab and Arab-American population in the United States, I will undoubtedly

leave out some narratives of menstruation. Through the limitations of this thesis, I will mainly interact with my participants through a conversation only, instead of a full ethnographic study.

“While works like the present one and other narratives are bound to make some errors because of their scope and differences in the sources, they are also important for giving a general overview of the past, which can be of great help in enhancing understanding of the present” (Keddie, 2007, p. 11). In bringing this thesis to a close, I have learned more about my research topic and research methods, that I hope to employ in future research endeavors. This thesis broke down structural meanings I held for myself, and for my fellow Arab and Arab-Americans. I hope my research has contributed to the field of anthropology regarding topics of menstruation in Arab and Arab-American communities.

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