

# A Masking of Menses

*Sophia Thomas*

Because I'd woken up with that familiar ache in my stomach, I slipped on my rainboots and a few tampons into my backpack as I got dressed. Later at school when it finally hit me, I'd wait for the moment when no one was looking and tuck a tampon inside my rainboot. As I walked down the hall, I'd feel the small plastic cylinder pressing into my ankle. My classmates walked by and smiled at me, unaware of the secret I had in my boot and in my uterus. It was a secret, after all. And that's the way I liked it. Period.

That time of the month brought out my stealthy side. I had all sorts of hiding spots: my rainboots, my bra, my sleeve, an empty water bottle. My friends were secretive too. If one of us forgot a pad or tampon, we'd give each other "the look," mouthing, *Do you have a pad?* I'd sometimes unwrap my pad or tampon in advance just to avoid the noise the package would make in the bathroom. God forbid an artificial crinkle. We treated our menstruation like an undercover operation, to be kept hidden at all costs. Our reputations depended on it.

I am 19 now. It has been six years since I started menstruating. If you asked me to describe myself, I would use words like *confident, feminist, advocate*. Outwardly, I am a passionate champion of women's rights. Nonetheless, you'd better believe that in certain situations, I wouldn't be caught dead with a pad or tampon visibly on me. I see this gap in myself and my fellow menstruators. We're all sorts of fearless until it comes time to do the dreaded walk of shame to the bathroom. We hide period products because the language we use to discuss

menstruation reaffirms and reflects stigmatization of menstruation. Given the option of coming forward and facing ridicule or hiding and avoiding shame, most would choose the latter.

If you Google “menstrual products,” one of the first definitions that comes up is, “**Sanitary** napkins, tampons, and pantyliners are disposable feminine **hygiene** products. Menstrual cups, cloth menstrual pads and period panties are the major categories of reusable feminine hygiene products” (Nicole, emphasis mine). Two words jump out here: “sanitary” and “hygiene.” On their own, these words are associated with cleanliness. In relation to menstruation, these words indicate that there is something unsanitary and unhygienic about period “blood” (the lining of the uterus).

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a tampon as, “A plug or tent inserted tightly into a wound, orifice, etc. to arrest hemorrhage, or used as a pessary (*Surgery*). Esp. one inserted into the vagina; now *spec.* one made commercially and bought to provide sanitary protection during menstruation” (“Tampon”). Again, we see the word “sanitary” cropping up in relation to menstruation, implying that menstruation itself is unsanitary. Moreover, this definition puts menstrual “blood” on par with blood that would exit a wound. While blood shed as a result of injury should be blocked to prevent major blood loss, menstruation is a natural process to expel “blood” that is no longer needed. Therefore, by comparing menstrual “blood” to blood resulting from a wound, it’s insinuated that menstruation is something to be blocked rather than allowed to occur naturally. The language used in these definitions perpetuates the idea that menstruation is unsanitary and that it should be “plugged” up or stopped. In digging deeper into the linguistics used

to describe menstruation and menstrual products, it becomes increasingly transparent that this type of covertly derogatory language is everywhere. After all, the very creation of pads and tampons was built on the concept that menstruation is inherently dirty.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, many doctors began advising menstruators on how to care for themselves during their period. Unsurprisingly, their guidance was often laden with clandestinely toxic language. Physician Mary Wood-Allen recommended “a frequent change of napkins, in order to remove those which are soiled from their irritating contact with the body” (Farrell-Beck 329-330). Wood-Allen explains here that due to the napkin’s “irritating” contact with the body, it is soiled, a word synonymous with “dirty” (“Soiled”). Wood-Allen’s use of the word “soiled” implies that the napkins, or menstrual pads, were “dirty” from period blood; hence, that period “blood” itself is dirty. Furthermore, the word “irritating” is futile in this context. Irritating is, by definition, unpleasurable (“Irritate”). In this situation, “irritating” implies that the napkin’s contact with the body is somehow unpleasurable. By employing this adjective, the overall negative connotations of menstruation are furthered in this sentence. It was this erroneous ideology that medical practitioners embraced when constructing precursory pads and tampons.

As doctors started to explore the world of menstruation, they began creating various rudimentary menstrual products. In 1866, Dr. Joseph C. Benzinger created a “pad,” complete with a sponge and a leather girdle. Benzinger’s intent was to “maintain the person of the patient in a cleanly condition” (Farrell-Beck 336). The word “cleanly”

suggests that without this contraption, the menstruator would be left dirty. Benzinger wasn't the only one disseminating this idea. In 1899, Dr. Albert Gray of St. Louis created the catamenial sac. This consisted of a rubber sack connected to a belt. The sack held an absorbent material, such as sponge or cotton, and a pocket on the belt contained disinfectant or carbolic acid (Farrell-Beck 337). The inclusion of disinfectant is present as Dr. Gray believed that there was something to disinfect. Not only may this have been detrimental to the user's reproductive organs, but it's yet another example of menstruation being displayed as tainted. Gray advertised this product in newspapers, coining it "Dr. Gray's Monthly Friend." Gray's use of the word "friend" is deceptively cordial. "Friend" is defined as "one attached to another by affection or esteem" (Friend). By referring to the catamenial sac as his friend, Gray communicated that he held affection and esteem for this creation, and thus that it must be reliable. Ironically, Gray feasibly didn't hold the agency, as a man, to coin a menstrual product his monthly friend. Regardless, readers likely took this title to intimate reliability and thus accepted that their period required disinfectant because it is innately dirty.

In the wider scheme of vaginal care, practices reflected the belief that vaginal discharge, whether menstrual "blood" or not, is contaminated. In 1890, nurses at the Woman's Hospital of Philadelphia treated birthing women by covering their vulva with a napkin saturated in bichloride of mercury, letting them sit for hours before burning immediately after (Farrell-Beck 343). Today, bichloride of mercury is considered very toxic to humans. Still, this practice was religiously studied and replicated under the belief that a woman's

vagina and the secretions it produces are, themselves, toxic. The burning of the napkin directly after removal only further supports this assertion. Inventors of pads and tampons borrowed from this ideology, creating products with an emphasis on cleanliness to combat the “dirtiness” of menstrual blood. While the products on the market today are without bichloride of mercury or carbolic acid, the underlying stigmatization of menstruation perseveres. Sure, the denunciation may not appear as obvious. You might have to read between the lines, rethink the nuance of commonplace language. Nevertheless, the stain on menstruation persists, and it is ever-present in the jargon cropping up in modern day descriptions of menstruation and menstrual products.

In an ad titled “Style,” fashion blogger Christina Caradona dances across the screen in a neon skirt and heart-shaped sunglasses, towing a rack of clothes. Fun music thumps in the background as a narrator describes Tampax’s new Radiant line of tampons. With a resealable wrapper for discreet disposal, they prevent periods from cramping users’ style. (“Tampax Radiant TV Commercial.”) Although the ad lasts a mere 15 seconds, there is a lot to unpack here. For one, the title alone encapsulates the overall message propagated in the ad. “Style” positions menstruation as a hindrance of fashion, in that menstruation and style may not coexist, and one must be sacrificed for the other. This idea is furthered by the choice to feature Caradona as the main actress. With her expertise in fashion, she wields the power to dictate what is “in.” Her endorsement of Tampax Radiant tampons communicates that concealing menstruation allows you to remain stylish. The title and presence of Caradona alike communicates the

need for menstruators to suppress their menstruation for the sake of maintaining their flair and confidence. Arguably the most important detail to note is the language used to describe the tampons. The word “discreet” is used to describe the disposable packaging and posed as a positive aspect of the tampon’s design. This linguistic choice concedes the idea that like a used tampon, periods should be discreetly disposed of, out of the eye of the public. Perhaps this discreteness is fundamentally what menstruators are meant to strive for as a whole-hiding. It should also be noted that the overall look of the ad, with bright visuals and blaring music, are meant to serve as a stark contrast to what life would be like if menstruation weren’t hidden; awkward and meek. Ironically, while the language used in this ad promises style and confidence with the concealment of menstruation, the act of hiding is often anxiety-inducing in itself. There is hypocrisy intertwined with the outcome that words like “discreet” promise.

While researching the “Style” ad, I got my period. Digging into my closet, I reached for an unopened box of tampons that I had bought weeks prior. Lo and behold, they were Tampax Radiant tampons. I found it comical that I’d fallen for the trap. I could see myself in the “feminine hygiene” aisle of the grocery store, reading “discreet” and “resealable wrapper” and being wooed by this innovative tampon. I had read these words but the implications of their meanings in relation to menstruation had never sunk in. My blunder, I believe, is indicative of how easy it is to soak in language when we are not hypervigilant. If we neglect to consider the meaning of language *and* the context of how it is being presented, we allow it to dictate our beliefs and behavior,

including hiding pads and tampons. Simply put, language has the power to shape and reflect how we think and our subsequent actions.

The connection between language and thought can be tied back to a hypothesis formulated in 1929 by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, justly coined the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It asserts that “the particular language one speaks influences the way one thinks about reality” (Lucy). Depending on the type of language used, reality can shift and take on new meanings. Like our unconscious use of words like “discreet” and “sanitary” to describe menstrual products, much of the language we speak is so ingrained in society that it goes unquestioned. Factoring in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, by using certain language subliminally, we are creating our understanding of reality *without even realizing it*. Possibly the most alarming consequence of this unintentional production is that we fail to recognize our role in creating the reality which we criticize. Take the menstrual movement, for example. Many people attend women’s marches, sign petitions, and post on social media in an attempt to promote the menstrual movement, or the fight for menstrual equity and advocacy. Hashtags such as #periodpower and #menstruationmatters circulate the web and are reposted by thousands. However, many will continue to refer to pads and tampons as “feminine hygiene products” and purchase tampons advertised as “discreet” and with a “resealable wrapper.” By employing this language, we are upholding the very inequality which we are working to tear down. I am not immune to this hypocrisy; my purchase of Tampax Radiant tampons while writing this essay is evident of just how easy it is to unintentionally speak stigma into

existence. This discrepancy is emblematic of the perilous undercurrent of overlooked prose.

Not only does language influence our perception of reality, but it dictates our role within that reality. When a man and a woman get married, writes J. Samuel Bois in his article "The Power of Words," they are pronounced husband and wife. These words, Bois argues, "establish a new set of relations between the man and woman." They will likely "cohabit, enjoy the possession of each other's bodies, share a common name, and begin to weave a joint pattern of life made of experiences, aspirations, purposes, and responsibilities" (Bois). Due to the connotations these words carry, the bearer of the title "husband" or "wife" steps into the role that the word implies, thus taking on the meaning of the word. How does this corroboration crop up outside of matrimony? On a general scale, we are inclined to accept and exemplify the language we use. For instance, when we discuss menstrual products as "sanitary," "hygienic," and "discreet," we're prone to believing that menstruation itself is unsanitary, unhygienic, and should be kept hidden. From this creed, we are then more apt to attempt to conceal our menstruation because our language is telling us that this is what menstruators should do. Nevertheless, we can use this penchant to our advantage. Bois states, "This projecting mechanism keeps functioning all by itself, whether we are aware of it or not. It does too often reinforce the hold of cultural shibboleths that we repeat without questioning them, but it will just as easily make possible new orientations, observations, and transactions, if we are wise enough to use it in a creative manner." In other words, this linguistic self-fulfilling prophecy can redefine our actions and the roles we fill if only we



recognize its existence and capitalize on it. Through the lens of menstruation, we have the power to change our actions if we change the language we use to discuss it. If we abandon words that frame menstruation as dirty and shameful for those which convey its normalcy, we might reject the notion that we must hide our menstruation. How does widespread semantic change occur? History marries it with concurring social change.

In 2018, a group of Stanford researchers wanted to study how gender and ethnic biases have changed over time in the US. They created an algorithm that would analyze “relationships and associations between words” from 1900 to present day. Poring over countless texts from this period, they compared changes in language to major social changes occurring during this time, from the women’s movement to the rise in Asian immigration (Shashkevich). Ultimately, the researchers found that changes in language directly correlated to demographic shifts in the US. As the women’s movement gained momentum and more Asian people entered the country, language changed to reveal a decline in negative stereotypes about these groups and an upsurge in positive wording. Their findings are telling of the link between language and social movements. When change occurs in society, so does popular vernacular. Vice versa, when language usage changes, social movements are further advanced. This symbiotic relationship suggests that language and societal change feed into one another. Without linguistic change, societal movements would likely fall flat. Without social change, language would likely remain stagnant. This codependence could be the ticket to advancing the menstrual

movement. To see the destigmatization of menstruation, we need to change the language we use to describe it.

When I get my period now, I'll admit that the idea of noticeably carrying my tampon to the bathroom still isn't appealing. I simply do not always need others knowing what is going on with my body. Still, I am entitled to the option of brandishing my tampon proudly as I promenade to the bathroom. The freedom to make a choice, unencumbered by potential humiliation, is what the end goal of linguistic alteration should be. When pads and tampons are not defined as "sanitary" or "hygiene" products, menstruation will not be associated with uncleanness. When menstruation is not perceived as uncleanly, menstrual products might not be geared towards concealing menstruation. When a menstruator can walk down the period product aisle at the grocery store and not be bombarded with the words "discreet" and "resealable wrapper," perhaps they won't believe their menstruation is something to hide. One small change in our language has the potential to ignite destigmatization, which in turn further transforms our discourse. This is how hiding becomes not an obligation, but a choice.

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