

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 2
March 2026

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Citation: David, Aradhya Maria. "Period Stories: Menstrual Narratives and the Limits of Realism." *Literariness Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Mar. 2026, pp. 615–628.



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Period Stories: Menstrual Narratives and the Limits of Realism

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Abstract: Menstruation has historically occupied a marginal position within literary representation, frequently displaced into euphemism, metaphor, or narrative silence. In contemporary literature, however, menstrual experience increasingly enters textual space as a site of embodied knowledge and formal experimentation. This article examines how contemporary fiction and life writing render menstruation not merely as biological occurrence or thematic reference, but as a recurring structure that shapes narrative temporality, perception, and voice.

Drawing on feminist cultural theory and narratology, the study argues that menstrual narratives exert formal pressure on realism's conventional investment in progression, climax, and irreversible transformation. Through attention to cyclical return, interruption, and routine maintenance, these texts foreground embodied processes that resist teleological development. Menstrual temporality introduces repetition without culmination and duration without narrative reward, unsettling dominant expectations of productivity, discipline, and bodily containment.

By tracing how menstruation reorganizes narrative pacing and redistributes significance to experiences often deemed minor or excessive, the article demonstrates that menstrual storytelling functions as a subtle mode of cultural resistance. Rather than relying solely on explicit political declaration, these works expand the representational capacities of contemporary realism, making visible forms of embodied recurrence historically relegated to the margins. In doing so, they reshape literary imagination and contribute to ongoing debates about gender, embodiment, and the politics of everyday life.

Keywords: *Menstrual narratives, Narrative temporality, Realism, Contemporary fiction, Feminist narratology, Period politics*

For much of the history of the novel, menstruation has remained narratively peripheral. When it appears, it is displaced into metaphor, absorbed into illness, or treated as disturbance rather than as ordinary, recurrent experience. This marginality is not merely thematic; it reflects a formal premise embedded within literary realism itself. Realist narration traditionally presumes a relatively stable perceiving body through which events acquire coherence and consequence. As Paul Ricoeur argues, emplotment configures time by arranging events into meaningful sequence, privileging transformation and irreversibility as the basis of narrative significance (Ricoeur 52). While realist fiction has long represented hunger, fatigue, sexuality, and disease—conditions that tend to intensify, demand response, or register as episodes within narrative progression—it has been less equipped to accommodate cyclical embodiment: processes that recur without producing decisive transformation.

Anthropological and psychoanalytic accounts of bodily boundaries, such as those proposed in *Purity and Danger* by Mary Douglas and in *Powers of Horror* by Julia Kristeva, illuminate why menstrual blood has historically been symbolically displaced. Douglas contends that substances which transgress categorical boundaries generate cultural anxiety and are therefore managed through ritual and taboo (Douglas 44). Similarly, Kristeva describes the abject as that which disturbs identity, system, and order, provoking symbolic exclusion (Kristeva 4). Substances that blur distinctions between inside and outside, purity and impurity, thus often provoke cultural regulation through allegory or silence. Yet beyond symbolic anxiety lies a narratological difficulty. Experiences structured by recurrence resist integration into plots organised around irreversible consequence. Classical realism depends upon progression: something happens once and therefore matters. Cyclical embodiment generates significance differently—through repetition, anticipation, and maintenance rather than singular event (Ricoeur 52).

Contemporary fiction increasingly incorporates this form of experience without translating it into crisis or metaphor. In works such as *Happening* by Annie Ernaux, *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante, *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti, and *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, menstruation functions less as revelation than as narrative condition (Ernaux; Ferrante; Kincaid; Adichie; Heti; Atwood). Recurrence alters pacing, redistributes perceptual attention, and inserts pauses that do not culminate in insight. The menstrual cycle exerts rhythmic pressure within narration itself, recalibrating how time, space, and social interaction are organised.

This article argues that menstrual temporality exposes a structural limit within classical models of realist narration. When narrative accommodates recurrence without transformation, plot yields to duration and event yields to adjustment. Gérard Genette's distinction between story time and discourse time clarifies how such repetition expands narrative duration without advancing irreversible action (Genette 86). The significance of these texts therefore lies not simply in representing a historically

marginalised bodily process, but in expanding what counts as narratable experience. By foregrounding maintenance, vigilance, material logistics, and endurance, contemporary menstrual narratives compel realism to reckon with forms of embodied life structured by return rather than climax.

Cyclical Time and Narrative Interruption

Realist narration has long linked significance to irreversibility. An event occurs, alters circumstance, and thereby acquires meaning. As Paul Ricoeur suggests in *Time and Narrative*, plot configures time by arranging happenings into consequential sequence; what matters is what does not return (Ricoeur 52). Cyclical embodiment unsettles this logic. Its force lies not in transformation but in recurrence.

In *Happening* by Annie Ernaux, temporality contracts around anticipation. Ernaux records the protagonist's fixation on the possible return of menstruation with almost clinical precision: "I waited for my period as if it were a verdict" (Ernaux, *Happening* 17). The phrasing does not dramatize the body as symbol; instead, it reorganizes narrative stakes around recurrence. Time ceases to move forward in developmental progression and instead narrows toward confirmation. Lectures, conversations, and daily routines continue, yet they lose independent narrative weight because significance attaches to the question of whether bleeding begins. The expected event is not new; it is familiar. Yet its recurrence would restore ordinary temporality. The suspense, therefore, is not directed toward transformation but toward repetition. What is awaited is the return of the known (Ernaux, *Happening*).

Ernaux's retrospective narration further intensifies this temporal contraction. Dates are recorded, counted, and recalculated. The prose lingers over days that do not advance plot but heighten anticipation. In Gérard Genette's terms, discourse time expands while story time stalls (Genette 86). The delay itself becomes narrative substance. Menstrual temporality thus interrupts linear development not by halting action entirely, but by subordinating it to a cyclical horizon.

A related structure appears in *Motherhood* by Sheila Heti. The narrator's deliberation about whether to have a child repeatedly reopens with each cycle. At one point she notes that menstruation arrives "like a reset," dissolving provisional decisions into renewed uncertainty (Heti 112). The cycle does not resolve the question; it reinstates it. What might conventionally serve as plot—the steady movement toward choice—remains suspended within patterned recurrence. The narrative accumulates reconsideration rather than progress. Each period interrupts momentum without providing clarity. Time loops back upon itself (Heti).

In *My Brilliant Friend* by Elena Ferrante, adolescence unfolds not through a singular rite of passage but through repeated bodily negotiations. The onset of menstruation is described as an event that “changed nothing and everything” (Ferrante 79), a formulation that resists decisive transformation. Development appears incremental rather than climactic. Meaning arises less from the first occurrence than from its repetition within social scrutiny—shame, curiosity, comparison, secrecy. The body conditions time without redirecting destiny (Ferrante).

Across these works, interruption becomes structural rather than incidental. Menstrual recurrence inserts pauses that do not culminate in insight. Brief moments of counting, checking, recalculating, or waiting enter narrative space once reserved for decisive action. Individually minor, their repetition recalibrates pacing. Plot yields to modulation; sequence yields to rhythm.

By integrating cyclical temporality into narrative form, these texts reveal a structural limit within classical realism. If realism depends upon irreversible event, menstrual recurrence demonstrates another mode of significance—one grounded in duration, anticipation, and maintenance (Ricoeur 52). What matters, in these narratives, is not what happens once but what returns.

Divided Attention and Embodied Consciousness

If cyclical temporality reorganises narrative time, menstrual experience also reshapes the structure of perception. Contemporary menstrual narratives repeatedly depict a consciousness divided between outward participation and inward monitoring. The subject remains socially engaged—listening, speaking, working—while simultaneously tracking sensation, pressure, timing, and the risk of exposure. What results is not dramatic crisis but sustained vigilance. Attention does not quite fracture; rather, it stratifies.

In *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, bodily awareness surfaces in brief, almost understated moments. Lucy describes lying in bed conscious of her own physicality in a way that interrupts narrative flow: “I could feel myself in my own skin” (Kincaid 63). The statement appears simple, yet it marks a shift from outward perception to inward inhabitation. Later, during menstruation, bodily awareness subtly reorganises her movements within domestic space. She continues conversation, continues work, yet the narration intermittently registers sensation—discomfort, dampness, fatigue—without allowing these to dominate the scene (Kincaid). The body moves from tacit background to explicit presence. What is narratively striking is not revelation but oscillation: the narration slides between engagement and monitoring.

This layered awareness becomes more socially charged in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. When Kambili begins menstruating, the moment is not elaborated as dramatic confession but registered through gesture and silence (Adichie 158). She becomes acutely aware of her

body in relation to her father's authority and the moral discipline of the household. The narration records her caution—how she sits, how she moves—without explicit discussion. Menstruation is neither announced nor openly discussed; instead, it intensifies self-surveillance. Kambili anticipates being seen even when she is not directly scrutinised. The body becomes an object of imagined evaluation. This doubling of awareness—living and monitoring simultaneously—structures her interiority (Adichie).

In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, divided attention becomes institutionalised. Offred's cycle is not merely personal; it is politically legible. She notes the arrival or absence of bleeding with acute apprehension, aware that others track its timing as well: "Every month I watch for blood" (Atwood 73). The sentence captures both bodily sensation and external consequence. Her perception splits between what she feels and what that feeling signifies within Gilead's reproductive regime. The body is experienced from within and interpreted from without. Awareness is doubled by surveillance (Atwood).

Phenomenologically, such scenes complicate conventional models of interiority. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues in *Phenomenology of Perception*, the body is the ground of perception rather than its object (Merleau-Ponty 94). Here, however, it intermittently insists on becoming its own object. The subject does not simply inhabit her body but anticipates how it might betray her. Attention becomes layered: a conversation unfolds, yet part of consciousness calculates proximity to privacy or evaluates posture. The narrative voice mirrors this stratification through subtle shifts in focalisation—brief returns to sensation that interrupt but do not derail social exchange.

Crucially, menstrual discomfort rarely authorises withdrawal. Unlike acute illness, it does not legitimize narrative retreat from obligation. The expectation of uninterrupted functionality intensifies divided attention. The more successfully normalcy is performed, the more discreet internal monitoring must remain. Literature renders this concealed labour visible by recording hesitation before sitting, the evaluation of duration in enclosed spaces, the measurement of clothing against risk. These details do not advance plot, yet they recalibrate the reader's understanding of presence.

By foregrounding embodied vigilance, these texts expand the scope of narrative consciousness. Inner life is not confined to reflection or memory; it includes sensory assessment, anticipatory control, and continuous negotiation between bodily rhythm and social expectation. The self appears neither fragmented nor unified, but layered—simultaneously participating and guarding.

In rendering this stratified awareness, contemporary menstrual narratives move beyond symbolic representation toward lived phenomenology. Subjectivity emerges as structured by accompaniment: a corporeal presence that neither culminates in crisis nor dissolves into background.

Narrative form adjusts accordingly, accommodating a consciousness that is always at once expressive and alert, immersed and monitoring.

Privacy, Visibility, and Social Negotiation

If cyclical temporality reshapes narrative pacing and divided attention reorganises perception, menstrual experience also recalibrates the field of social visibility. In these texts, menstruation is rarely figured as purely private. It occupies a threshold between body and environment, generating continuous calculation about who might notice, what must remain concealed, and how behaviour should adjust. Privacy is not given; it is actively produced.

In *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, bodily awareness subtly reorganises spatial conduct. Lucy frequently registers her physical presence in rooms shared with others, particularly Mariah (Kincaid 68). During moments of discomfort, the narration tightens around small bodily negotiations—how she lies, how she moves, how she positions herself in bed. Nothing is announced publicly, yet ordinary gestures acquire deliberateness. Social presence is modulated without declaration. The body does not disrupt interaction; it recalibrates it from within. Space becomes strategic. Privacy emerges not as isolation but as careful self-placement within shared domestic environments (Kincaid).

A related dynamic structures *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. When Kambili first menstruates, the narrative does not stage a dramatic confrontation. Instead, her mother quietly hands her sanitary pads and offers minimal instruction. The scene is marked by understatement: “It is nothing,” her mother says (Adichie 160), yet the very insistence of normalcy underscores the need for discretion. The event alters Kambili’s self-perception, but conversation remains controlled. Movement becomes measured. Silence operates as discipline. To articulate bodily change too openly would disturb the moral order sustained by restraint. Recognition circulates without explicit naming. Menstruation is socially known yet linguistically contained (Adichie).

In *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, visibility acquires institutional force. Offred’s menstrual cycle is monitored indirectly through ritualised structures that assume reproductive function. When bleeding arrives, she experiences not relief alone but failure within Gilead’s hierarchy: “I sink down into my body as into a swamp” (Atwood 85). The metaphor renders bodily awareness inseparable from political consequence. Here privacy collapses under surveillance. The cycle is no longer merely personal rhythm; it becomes state-relevant information. Visibility is pre-structured by power (Atwood).

Across these works, others often perceive more than is spoken. Privacy may be tacitly granted—absences overlooked, irregularities unremarked—but such allowances do not dissolve constraint. Instead, they confirm a shared understanding that must remain unvoiced. Knowledge circulates

gesturally. Dialogue yields to pause, glance, accommodation. What is known is inferred rather than declared.

This dynamic illuminates the social labour embedded in menstrual experience. The subject positions herself near bathrooms, monitors duration of interaction, evaluates seating surfaces, checks for potential exposure. These adjustments rarely produce overt conflict, yet they structure participation. As Erving Goffman argues in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, everyday normalcy depends upon coordinated management of what may be seen (Goffman 33). Menstrual embodiment introduces the possibility of visible disruption—stain, smell, deviation—against which vigilance is directed. The anticipation of scrutiny governs behaviour even in the absence of direct observation.

Similarly, Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* clarifies how regulation operates through self-surveillance rather than explicit prohibition (Foucault 201). No authority figure need intervene; the subject anticipates norms of cleanliness and composure and governs herself accordingly. Discipline becomes internalised as spatial and behavioural calibration. This internalisation is mirrored formally: narration lingers on anticipatory gestures and self-adjustments, allowing surveillance to shape not only behaviour within the story but the distribution of narrative attention itself. The body is managed pre-emptively.

By foregrounding privacy as practice rather than condition, these texts complicate the boundary between interior and exterior life. Embodiment emerges as collectively acknowledged yet individually borne. What remains unsaid structures behaviour as decisively as speech. Menstrual narration thus reveals social order not through confrontation but through calibration: a choreography of discretion in which visibility and silence coexist.

Collective Experience Without Collective Voice

Menstruation recurs across bodies, but it does not recur across meanings. Contemporary fiction repeatedly situates the same biological process within divergent structures of authority, revealing not a shared identity but a series of context-bound negotiations. What is physiologically comparable becomes socially distinct.

In *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, the menstrual cycle is no longer a private rhythm but an object of institutional interpretation. Its timing determines status; its absence or arrival carries political consequence (Atwood 94). The protagonist's body is read before it is felt. Awareness therefore divides: she registers sensation while anticipating surveillance, monitoring herself as though from the outside. Privacy does not disappear through exposure alone but through imposed meaning. The body becomes publicly legible before it becomes personally interpretable (Atwood).

This redistribution of interpretive authority alters narrative interiority. The character cannot encounter her body as neutral fact because its significance precedes her own understanding. Menstruation functions as information within a political system—biological recurrence converted into administrative data. The cycle is tracked, anticipated, and evaluated according to criteria external to the subject who experiences it. The result is not solidarity among bodies but stratification among them, determined by reproductive capacity and institutional control.

Across the texts examined in this article—*Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid and *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie among them—recurrence remains biological while consequence remains social. In *Lucy*, bodily awareness recalibrates domestic conduct (Kincaid 71); in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is absorbed into familial discipline (Adichie 162); elsewhere it produces private vigilance or interpersonal tact. The same event generates distinct stakes depending on the structures surrounding it. These novels offer resemblance without equivalence.

Because meanings diverge, contemporary menstrual narratives resist treating embodiment as automatic collectivity. Recognition operates at the level of pattern—readers perceive recurrence across situations—yet interpretation remains situated. As Judith Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, material processes do not speak for themselves; they acquire significance within regulatory frameworks (Butler 2). What appears shared at the level of physiology fragments at the level of experience.

Narrative voice reflects this condition. No single perspective claims representational authority. Silence, compliance, calculation, resistance—each emerges as a response to specific constraints rather than as variation on a unified theme. The absence of a collective voice does not signal isolation; it underscores the degree to which embodiment is mediated by power. Even when experiences resemble one another, they cannot collapse into universality without erasing the forces that shape them.

This plurality reshapes what representation accomplishes. Instead of producing a definitive account of “women’s experience,” these texts preserve difference within similarity. Menstruation functions not as identity but as recurring condition—one whose stakes shift with environment, surveillance, intimacy, and law.

By maintaining particularity within repetition, contemporary fiction extends realism beyond individual psychology toward structural awareness. Pattern becomes visible without dissolving circumstance. Embodiment appears neither purely private nor automatically collective, but historically and socially situated. What recurs is the body; what changes, however, is the world that reads it.

Materiality and the Refusal of Metaphor

A striking feature of contemporary menstrual narratives is their resistance to metaphor. Literary tradition has frequently translated menstruation into symbol—impurity, fertility, danger, renewal—thereby displacing physical experience into allegory. The works considered here move in the opposite direction. They reduce symbolic distance and return attention to substance: blood, fabric, odour, disposal, texture, timing. The narrative does not ask what menstruation represents; it records what must be managed.

In *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante, bodily processes are rendered with unsentimental directness. Olga's physical discomfort is described in blunt detail—sweat clinging to skin, damp underwear, the irritation of blood against fabric (Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment* 102). There is no elevation of menstrual blood into metaphorical crisis. Instead, the prose attends to washing, changing, checking for stains, and the logistics of disposal within a claustrophobic domestic setting (Ferrante). Emotional collapse and bodily maintenance coexist without symbolic fusion. Blood does not stand in for abandonment; it requires cleaning. The body's material demands interrupt the narrative not as emblem but as infrastructure. The scene's intensity arises from accumulation of detail rather than allegorical heightening.

Similarly, in *Happening* by Annie Ernaux, menstruation is described with documentary restraint. Ernaux records the texture and colour of blood, the anxiety of delay, and the scrutiny of undergarments (Ernaux 21). She refuses poetic substitution. At one point, she notes simply the physical fact of bleeding and the relief it brings, without dramatizing it beyond its bodily function (Ernaux). The language remains observational, almost clinical. This refusal of metaphor is deliberate. By declining to convert menstrual blood into symbolic excess, Ernaux preserves its material specificity and its temporal function within the narrative.

This shift alters descriptive practice. Instead of lyrical abstraction, the prose adopts practical precision. References to washing, wrapping, carrying spare items, or calculating proximity to privacy appear briefly and without rhetorical embellishment. The experience is presented as routine labour. Menstruation is neither romanticised nor sensationalised; it is operational. The narrative interest lies in the coordination required to sustain daily life alongside bodily recurrence.

The refusal of metaphor performs a critical aesthetic function. Symbolic language traditionally allows readers to encounter bodily processes at interpretive distance, transforming sensation into theme. These narratives interrupt that comfort. The reader confronts logistics: the need for water, privacy, spare clothing; the risk of stain; the planning required in public space. Attention shifts from what menstruation means to what it demands. The body emerges, in these scenes, as an infrastructural presence within narrative space.

Material emphasis also preserves contextual specificity. The management of blood differs across environments—travel, domestic confinement, institutional surveillance. Scarcity alters behaviour; unfamiliar space intensifies vigilance. Because these details remain literal rather than allegorical, they resist flattening into universal symbol. Meaning arises from circumstance.

By granting menstrual care the same descriptive register as eating, sleeping, or cleaning, these texts expand the representational scope of realism. What earlier literary traditions displaced into euphemism or symbol is here integrated into everyday mechanics. The effect is subtle but decisive: menstruation enters fiction not as spectacle but as maintenance.

In refusing symbolic elevation, contemporary menstrual narratives challenge a longstanding literary reflex. They suggest that accurate description is itself intervention—that attention to material process can destabilise inherited hierarchies of significance. The body is permitted to remain literal, and in doing so, it quietly reorganises narrative value.

Performative Normalcy and the Labour of Respectability

If menstrual experience requires management, it also demands performance. Contemporary narratives repeatedly show that the menstruating subject is expected not merely to endure discomfort but to remain outwardly unchanged. Work continues, conversations proceed, schedules hold. The body may be internally unsettled, yet externally it must appear composed. What is at stake is not only concealment of blood, but the preservation of normalcy.

This expectation reflects a broader cultural alignment between femininity and self-regulation. The respectable body is imagined as contained, clean, and uninterrupted by visible leakage or odour. Menstruation unsettles this ideal precisely because it introduces the possibility of exposure. The subject must therefore enact containment. Clothing is selected strategically, movement moderated, posture calibrated, absence carefully timed. These micro-adjustments rarely produce dramatic scenes; instead, they accumulate as continuous labour.

The structure of this labour is performative. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, gender norms persist through reiterated acts rather than singular decree (Butler 191). The menstruating subject anticipates an audience—colleagues, family members, strangers—whose perception will determine whether composure has been maintained. Even when no one is explicitly watching, the possibility of being read governs behaviour. The body becomes a site of risk management. Social fluency depends upon successful concealment, and failure carries the threat of embarrassment or moral judgement.

Unlike overt prohibition, performative normalcy operates through internalisation. No authority figure need intervene; the subject pre-empts disruption herself. Contemporary fiction renders this anticipatory discipline visible through hesitation, calculation, and strategic silence. A pause before

standing, a measured smile despite cramping, a decision to remain through a meeting rather than excuse oneself—such moments reveal how respectability is enacted rather than naturally possessed.

Importantly, these narratives resist presenting performance as wholly oppressive. The maintenance of composure enables continued participation in professional and social life. Performance can function as access. Yet this access is not evenly distributed. The burden of adjustment falls on the menstruating subject rather than on collective structures that might accommodate bodily variation. The seamless surface of public life is sustained through unequal accommodation.

By documenting this effort, literature exposes the constructed nature of normalcy. What appears spontaneous—the uninterrupted, self-contained body—is revealed as the outcome of vigilance. Respectability emerges not as inherent quality but as ongoing achievement. Erving Goffman's insight in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* that social interaction resembles staged performance acquires particular resonance here (Goffman 22). Backstage labour remains hidden so that front-stage fluency can persist.

The critical force of these narratives lies precisely in making that backstage visible. They do not advocate spectacle or deliberate disruption. Instead, they show that composure itself is costly. By recording the work required to appear unaffected, contemporary fiction unsettles the assumption that discipline is natural or universal. The performance may succeed within the story, but its exposure within narrative reframes how readers understand bodily order.

Through the lens of performative normalcy, menstrual storytelling situates embodiment within broader systems of productivity, cleanliness, and respectability. The body must align with institutional schedules, dress codes, and expectations of emotional neutrality. When it cannot fully comply, the subject compensates. Literature, by attending to this compensation, transforms menstruation from private inconvenience into analytic lens. It reveals how cultural ideals of control are sustained—not effortlessly, but through continuous, embodied labour.

Pain Without Narrative Reward

Narrative convention often assigns suffering value through consequence. Illness yields insight, crisis produces transformation, endurance confirms character. Discomfort justifies itself by leading somewhere. Menstrual pain unsettles this economy because it recurs without culmination. It neither resolves conflict nor permanently alters identity; it simply returns.

In *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante, bodily distress accompanies emotional unraveling without explanatory hierarchy. Olga experiences nausea, fatigue, sweating, menstrual bleeding, and digestive discomfort alongside humiliation and rage following her husband's departure (Ferrante, *The Days of Abandonment* 97). Yet the narration refuses to convert bodily sensation into

symbolic commentary on betrayal. Physical pain does not illuminate emotional truth; it compounds it. Blood stains clothing; sweat dampens fabric; cramps slow movement. The body requires washing and changing even as psychological instability intensifies (Ferrante). No revelation emerges from this conjunction. Instead, the narrative accumulates discomfort in layers.

At several moments, Olga pauses not for epiphany but because her body demands attention. She sits, cleans, checks herself, resumes activity. The pause produces no moral clarity. Pain neither ennoble nor transforms her; it persists. The narrative withholds the familiar conversion of suffering into growth. Experience thickens but does not crystallise.

A similar restraint shapes *A Woman's Story* by Annie Ernaux. Although focused on the narrator's mother, the text registers bodily decline, weakness, and exhaustion in plain terms (Ernaux, *A Woman's Story* 42). Physical limitation is described without dramatization. There is no attempt to render bodily deterioration metaphorical or redemptive. Discomfort remains woven into duration. The body registers itself as strain, yet this strain does not produce narrative climax (Ernaux).

In both works, bodily experience interrupts activity without reorganising destiny. Characters slow down, withdraw briefly, or endure through discomfort, but these interruptions do not serve as turning points. The narrative unit becomes, less the revelation, and more the pause. What matters is continuation rather than transformation.

This refusal challenges a deeply embedded narrative logic in which hardship legitimises itself through outcome. As Paul Ricoeur argues in *Time and Narrative*, plot traditionally configures experience into meaningful sequence (Ricoeur 66). Here, menstrual pain offers no such configuration. It does not instruct; it insists. Its recurrence destabilises the expectation that pain must be narratively productive.

By declining to translate discomfort into moral reward, these works expand the ethical horizon of realism. Not all bodily experience elevates or devastates a life, yet it exerts pressure on perception, movement, and mood. The narrative grants that pressure visibility without inflating it into heroism. Endurance appears without triumph; difficulty persists without resolution.

The result is a quiet reorientation of narrative value. Meaning arises not from overcoming the body but from living alongside it. Persistence itself becomes legible. In foregrounding pain without narrative reward, contemporary menstrual narratives make space for forms of experience that resist climax, catharsis, and moral extraction. They register what continues.

Conclusion

Menstrual narration does not merely expand the archive of representable female experience; it exposes a structural limit within classical realist form. By foregrounding cyclical temporality, routine material labour, calibrated visibility, and pain without narrative reward, these texts reveal the inadequacy of event-driven, linear models of plot to account for recurring embodied experience. As Paul Ricoeur argues, classical emplotment depends upon configuration that renders time meaningful through irreversible sequence (Ricoeur 52). Menstrual time does not culminate. It returns. And in returning, it interrupts realism's investment in progression, climax, and transformation.

Across *Lucy* by Jamaica Kincaid, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood, *The Days of Abandonment* by Elena Ferrante, and *Happening* by Annie Ernaux, menstruation is integrated not as spectacle but as infrastructure. It reorganizes pacing, redirects attention toward maintenance, recalibrates social space, and resists symbolic inflation (Ernaux; Ferrante; Atwood). Blood remains literal; discomfort remains recurrent; privacy remains negotiated. The narrative significance of these elements lies precisely in their refusal to produce revelation. They persist without conversion into metaphor or moral lesson.

In doing so, contemporary menstrual narratives alter the descriptive hierarchy of realism. What earlier traditions displaced into euphemism or allegory is granted textual density. The ordinary becomes structurally consequential. As Gérard Genette suggests in his account of narrative duration, the allocation of textual space determines perceived importance (Genette 94). Here, routine bodily maintenance receives the descriptive weight once reserved for decisive action. Plot no longer depends solely on irreversible events; it accommodates recurrence. Attention shifts from transformation to endurance, from climax to continuation.

This formal shift carries theoretical implications. If realism has historically privileged visible action, public consequence, and forward movement, menstrual temporality reveals an alternative logic grounded in repetition, interior calibration, and embodied maintenance. Judith Butler's insight that norms persist through reiteration rather than singular decree further clarifies how recurrence can itself structure meaning (Butler 191). The challenge posed by menstrual narration is therefore not additive but structural. It asks whether narrative form can fully register experiences that neither culminate nor resolve.

By rendering cyclical embodiment narratively central, these works do more than diversify subject matter. They expand realism's capacity to account for duration without teleology. In that expansion, the limits of classical narration become visible—not as failure, but as historical inheritance open to reconfiguration.

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