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Animating Puberty: Menstrual Metaphors, Bodily Transformation and Female Adolescence in Contemporary Animated Cinema

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Abstract: Narratives of puberty, menstruation and bodily metamorphosis have always been given marginal representation in children's literature and media. Even when the representation is made, they are often clothed in euphemism, silence or symbolic displacement. Animated films, however, provide unique representational possibilities for depicting bodily, emotional and social dynamics associated with menstruation and puberty. They provide vibrant platforms for externalising internal experiences which are intriguing and difficult to articulate. Contemporary animation has increasingly engaged with menstruation and adolescent bodily transformation through innovative visual metaphors and narrative strategies. This article examines how recent animated films employ bodily metamorphosis, fantasy, and affective symbolism to represent menstruation and female puberty. Drawing on feminist film theory, body studies, animation studies, and developmental psychology, the article analyses the emergence of menstrual metaphors in contemporary animated cinema, with particular emphasis on *Turning Red* (2022), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Inside Out* (2015) and *Wolfwalkers* (2020). The study argues that contemporary animation has become a crucial cultural site for renegotiating the meanings of menstruation, transforming a historically stigmatised biological process into a narrative of identity formation, emotional complexity, and self-acceptance. The study demonstrates how animation uses transformation narratives to negotiate cultural anxieties surrounding adolescence while simultaneously empowering young audiences to embrace change. Through visual exaggeration and symbolic transformation, animation renders visible experiences that have traditionally remained culturally invisible. In doing so, these films challenge longstanding taboos surrounding menstruation and contribute to more inclusive representations of adolescent embodiment.

Keywords: *Puberty, Animation, Menstruation, Coming-of-Age Narratives, Body Transformation, Adolescence, Feminist Media Studies*

Introduction

Puberty is usually described as a biological process through which the human body moves from childhood towards sexual maturity. Such a description, however, though scientifically useful, does not adequately account for the cultural meanings attached to bodily change. Puberty and menstruation are processes that have multiple implications, something that transcend the dimensions of ordinary bodily experiences to incorporate cultural, emotional, psychological and feminist dynamics. Puberty alters the adolescent's relationship with the body, but it also changes the ways in which the body is perceived by family, peers and society. The adolescent body becomes increasingly visible as an object of social attention and regulation. For girls and menstruating individuals, menstruation is one of the most significant markers of this transition because it makes bodily maturation materially visible.

The paradox of menstruation is that it is both ordinary and culturally uncomfortable. It is an everyday physiological process, yet the language surrounding it has historically been dominated by euphemism, concealment and embarrassment. Menstruation may be described indirectly as a “period,” “that time of the month,” “chums,” “shark week” or simply “being unwell.” Popular culture has frequently participated in this concealment. Each culture has its rituals and traditions for their menstruating women. Between all the plethora of practices and the languages lies the common thread of shame and embarrassment. The language surrounding menstruation does everything it can to hide it, and hence increase the stigma around it. The familiar blue liquid used in menstrual-product advertising is an especially clear example of a representational culture in which blood itself is considered too disruptive to display.

Feminist scholarship has demonstrated that this discomfort is not simply a matter of personal embarrassment. It is connected to broader cultural constructions of the female body. Emily Martin's *The Woman in the Body* examines the metaphors through which reproductive processes are described and argues that “Menstruation not only carries with it the connotation of a productive system that has failed to produce; it also carries the idea of production gone awry, making products of no use, not to specification, unsalable, wasted, scrap” (46). Iris Marion Young similarly examines the ways in which women's bodily experiences are shaped by social expectations concerning bodily conduct and spatiality.

The problem becomes particularly interesting in children's and family media. Childhood is frequently associated with innocence, while menstruation, reproductive sexuality and bodily fluids are associated with adulthood. The transition between these categories creates representational discomfort. As a result, stories about girls growing up have often displaced puberty into fantasy. A girl may

become a princess, mermaid, witch, animal or supernatural being without ever directly discussing menstruation.

Animation is uniquely equipped to perform such displacement because transformation is already one of its central aesthetic possibilities. Bodies in animation are not bound by photographic realism. They can expand, shrink, dissolve, mutate or become other bodies. Paul Wells describes metamorphosis as “the constituent core of animation itself” (69). Susan J. Napier similarly argues that animation can “emphasize transformation in a way that simply no other artistic genre is capable of doing” (36). These observations are especially significant for representations of puberty because puberty itself is experienced as transformation.

The adolescent does not always experience bodily change as gradual or orderly. Height changes, skin changes, menstruation, breast development, body hair, hormonal fluctuations and emotional intensity can produce a sense of unfamiliarity. Animation can convert this unfamiliarity into visual form. Domee Shi's *Turning Red* (2022) provides the most explicit example in recent mainstream animation. The film follows thirteen-year-old Meilin Lee, whose intense emotions cause her to transform into a giant red panda. The film immediately associates this transformation with menstruation when Meilin's mother, Ming, assumes that her daughter has begun her period and arrives with menstrual products. The connection is humorous, but the humour itself is significant: menstruation becomes something that can be named, discussed and shown within a mainstream animated film. Yet the red panda is not a simple one-to-one metaphor for menstruation. It represents a much larger spectrum of adolescent experience. It encompasses hormonal change, emotional intensity, sexuality, friendship, cultural inheritance, mother-daughter conflict and the development of individual autonomy. The menstrual metaphor therefore expands into a metaphor for becoming.

The other three films in this study illuminate different aspects of this process. *Inside Out* (2015) does not focus directly on menstruation, but it provides an important representation of emotional transformation. By turning emotions into characters, it externalizes the adolescent interior. *Spirited Away* (2001) represents maturation through liminality, displacement and the destabilization of identity. *Wolfwalkers* (2020) presents bodily transformation as a form of resistance to authoritarian attempts to regulate bodies, nature and female freedom.

These films refuse to be treated as equivalent representations of menstruation. Rather, they constitute a comparative corpus through which different dimensions of adolescent transformation become visible. *Turning Red* makes the changing body explicit; *Inside Out* makes emotional transformation visible; *Spirited Away* represents identity transformation; and *Wolfwalkers* connects bodily transformation with freedom and resistance.

The present article therefore asks three questions: How does animation represent menstruation and puberty through visual and narrative metaphor? What cultural assumptions about gender, adolescence and embodiment are embedded in these representations? And how do contemporary animated films challenge or reproduce historical taboos concerning female bodily change?

The central argument is that contemporary animation is developing a new representational grammar of adolescence. In this grammar, transformation is no longer necessarily a crisis from which the protagonist must return to “normal.” Instead, transformation becomes a condition of self-knowledge. The changing body can be excessive without being shameful, emotional without being irrational, culturally situated without being restrictive, and different without being monstrous.

Literature Review

Menstruation and the Cultural Construction of the Female Body

Menstruation has long occupied an ambiguous position in cultural discourse. Its biological normality contrasts sharply with its cultural treatment as something private, embarrassing or contaminating. Martin's study of reproductive discourse is important because it shows that scientific descriptions are themselves shaped by cultural assumptions. Reproductive processes have often been described through metaphors of production, efficiency and failure, thereby making the body legible according to cultural models rather than purely biological ones.

The work of menstrual-stigma scholars further demonstrates the importance of representation. Ingrid Johnston-Robledo and Joan Chrisler describe menstruation as a “social stigma” and argue that cultural representations participate in maintaining negative attitudes toward menstruating bodies (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler 181–99). Such stigma is not produced by the biological process itself, but through repeated cultural associations between menstruation and impurity, secrecy and lack of control. The stigma surrounding menstruation can therefore be understood as a cultural process through which a normal bodily experience is made socially problematic. Representation becomes important in this context because repeated images of secrecy, embarrassment or contamination can reinforce these meanings, while alternative representations can make menstruation more visible and discussable.

The issue of control becomes especially important in relation to female embodiment. Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight* examines the ways in which women's bodies become sites of discipline. “The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture” (Bordo 165). The female body is expected to remain controlled, contained and socially legible. Menstruation interrupts this ideal because it makes the body visibly and materially

resistant to complete control. Bordo's formulation is particularly relevant to the present study because it shifts attention from the biological process itself to the cultural expectations imposed upon the female body. The significance of menstrual representation, therefore, lies partly in how such representations negotiate the tension between a changing body and the demand that the body remain controlled and socially acceptable. This is where feminist body theory intersects with animation. If the culturally acceptable female body is expected to remain contained, animation can deliberately create bodies that are not contained. The giant red panda in *Turning Red* is not merely a humorous creature. It is a visual challenge to the idea that the adolescent female body should remain discreet.

Abjection and the Menstrual Body

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection provides another useful framework. Kristeva identifies the abject as “what disturbs identity, system, order” and as that which does not respect “borders, positions, rules” (4). The menstrual body fits this formulation because menstrual blood crosses the boundary between inside and outside. It is part of the body but is expelled from the body. The abject provides a framework to discuss why menstruation can become culturally uncomfortable even when it is biologically ordinary. The concept is particularly useful for understanding the cultural unease surrounding menstruation because the menstrual body unsettles the distinction between what is considered private and what becomes publicly visible. In this sense, menstrual stigma can be understood as an attempt to restore boundaries that the changing body temporarily disrupts.

Barbara Creed develops a related argument in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, examining the ways in which cinema associates female bodies with horror through sexuality, reproduction, blood and corporeal instability (Creed 7). The concept is especially relevant to *Turning Red*, where the female adolescent body becomes literally animalistic, enormous and difficult to control. However, *Turning Red* also revises the logic of the monstrous-feminine. The panda initially appears frightening because it violates expectations concerning feminine restraint. Yet the narrative eventually rejects the idea that the monster must be destroyed. Meilin keeps the panda. The transformation therefore moves from monstrosity to multiplicity.

Gender Performativity and the Adolescent Girl

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers another important perspective. Butler argues that gender is constituted through “a stylized repetition of acts” (*Gender Trouble* 179). Gender, therefore, is not simply an internal truth expressed through behaviour; it is continually produced through repeated social practices. This understanding is particularly relevant to adolescence, when established

performances of gender may become increasingly difficult to sustain in the face of bodily and emotional change.

This is particularly relevant to Meilin's identity as a "good daughter." Her behaviour has been organized around obedience, achievement, filial loyalty and emotional control. The panda interrupts this performance. The transformed body exposes desires that the previous identity attempted to contain. The film thus asks an important question: What happens when the body refuses to perform the identity expected of it? The answer is not that Meilin abandons femininity. Instead, she develops a more complex form of femininity in which obedience is no longer the sole measure of being a good daughter. The transformation therefore does not simply represent a rejection of gender expectations; it reveals the possibility of renegotiating them.

Animation and Metamorphosis

Animation studies provide the formal basis for the perspectives explored in the study. Wells's assertion that metamorphosis is "the constituent core of animation itself" (69) identifies something fundamental about the medium. Animation does not merely represent movement; it can make transformation itself the movement. Napier similarly observes that animation can emphasize transformation in ways other genres cannot (36). Metamorphosis is something that is particularly significant for puberty. It captures the essence of the term. Puberty is a process in which the body becomes unfamiliar. Animation can externalize this experience without requiring realism. The formal capacity of animation to transform bodies therefore corresponds closely to the experiential uncertainty of puberty, allowing changes that may be gradual, internal or difficult to articulate to acquire a visible and imaginative form. The red panda is impossible biologically, but emotionally recognizable. The wolf walker is fantastical, but the experience of discovering freedom through the transformed body is psychologically meaningful. Riley's emotions are impossible as literal persons, but they make interior conflict visible. Chihiro's movement through the spirit world is fantastical but the uncertainty of entering an unfamiliar world corresponds to the experience of growing up.

Emotion and Affect

Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* helps extend the argument beyond the body. Emotions are not merely private states. They circulate between people and become attached to bodies, objects and communities (Ahmed 10). This perspective is important to the present study because the emotional dimensions of puberty cannot be separated from the social environments in which the adolescent experiences bodily change. Feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, excitement or anger are shaped not only by the changing body but also by the responses of family, peers and the wider culture. This is

particularly significant in *Inside Out*. The film turns emotion into embodied characters and thereby challenges the distinction between internal and external experience. This has implications for the cultural representation of adolescent girls whose emotional responses are frequently trivialized or attributed to hormonal instability. *Inside Out* offers a different model in which emotional complexity is not a defect but a necessary component of psychological development

Intersectionality and Cultural Identity

Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 140) helps in reading the dialectics of *Turning Red* better. An intersectional approach prevents the adolescent experience represented in the film from being treated as a universal model of female puberty. Meilin's experience of adolescence cannot be separated from her Chinese-Canadian identity and the intergenerational structures of her family. The film challenges a universalized conception of puberty. There is no universal adolescent girl. The experiences of puberty are shaped by family, culture, ethnicity, class and social expectations.

Meilin's red panda is inherited through a female lineage. Her transformation is therefore simultaneously biological, cultural and historical. This intergenerational dimension distinguishes the film from narratives in which growing up is represented solely as a movement from family dependence toward individual freedom. Meilin does seek independence, but she does not need to reject her cultural identity in order to achieve it.

Research Gap

Existing scholarship provides substantial studies of menstruation, feminist embodiment, animation, affect and adolescent identity. However, these areas are often examined separately. Menstrual studies has concentrated on stigma, health, education, advertising and cultural silence while animation studies has emphasized metamorphosis, fantasy, visual form and technological possibilities of the medium. Feminist film studies has examined representations of the female body, sexuality and monstrosity whereas Adolescent studies has focused on identity, emotional development and social transition. The intersection of these fields remains comparatively underdeveloped.

In particular, *Turning Red* is frequently discussed either as a film about menstruation or as a coming-of-age narrative. A narrow menstrual reading risks reducing the panda to a single biological metaphor, while a general coming-of-age reading risks overlooking the significance of menstruation. This article proposes that the red panda should instead be read as an expanded menstrual metaphor. Menstruation provides the narrative entry point, but the metaphor develops into a broader representation of adolescent embodiment.

A comparative reading of *Turning Red* alongside *Inside Out*, *Spirited Away* and *Wolfwalkers* makes this development clearer. The films collectively reveal a movement from bodily transformation to emotional transformation, from emotional transformation to identity formation, and from identity formation to bodily autonomy. The present article examines menstrual metaphor as part of a larger animated discourse of becoming.

Research Methodology

The study employs a qualitative, interpretive and comparative textual analysis of four animated feature films: *Turning Red* (2022), *Inside Out* (2015), *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Wolfwalkers* (2020). *Turning Red* is the primary text because it offers the most explicit engagement with menstruation and female puberty. *Inside Out* is selected because it externalizes emotional experience through embodied characters. *Spirited Away* is included because it constructs female maturation through liminality, displacement and identity instability. *Wolfwalkers* is selected because it associates female bodily transformation with freedom, friendship and resistance to authoritarian control.

The analysis examines narrative structure, dialogue, character construction, visual symbolism, colour, bodily metamorphosis, spatial organization, family relationships and representations of emotion. Particular attention is paid to moments in which the body becomes a site of conflict between personal experience and social expectation. The theoretical framework combines feminist body studies, abjection theory, gender performativity, affect theory, intersectionality, animation studies and theories of adolescent identity.

Animation, Metamorphosis and the Problem of the Changing Body

Animation is particularly suited to representing puberty because its formal vocabulary is based upon change. Metamorphosis forms the crux of animation; it is not just the central trope but the technique too. The animated body is not necessarily stable. It can become another body. It can become a landscape. It can become an animal. It can become an emotion. It can become a visual metaphor!

Puberty is itself difficult to visualize through conventional realism because much of what happens is internal or gradual. Animation can make the invisible visible. This capacity becomes especially powerful when transformation is connected with shame. The adolescent may experience bodily change as something that should not be noticed. Animation does the opposite. It exaggerates. Meilin's panda is enormous. Riley's emotions occupy a visible headquarters. Chihiro's world becomes increasingly strange. Robyn and Mebh move between human and animal forms. The exaggeration creates a visual language in which the adolescent experience is not minimized.

Turning Red: Menstruation, Metamorphosis and the Adolescent Self

Among contemporary animated films, *Turning Red* provides perhaps the clearest example of menstruation becoming narratively visible. Meilin is thirteen and initially appears to have a highly controlled identity. She excels academically, helps at the family temple and seeks her mother's approval. Her friends, however, reveal another side of her. She is enthusiastic, imaginative, emotionally intense and fascinated by the boy band 4*Town. The first transformation disrupts the carefully controlled identity. When Meilin wakes up as a giant red panda, Ming assumes that her daughter has begun menstruating. The sequence deliberately connects the panda with menstruation before the film expands its meaning. This is an important representational strategy because the film does not make menstruation the entire story. Instead, it uses menstruation as the gateway into adolescence, allowing bodily change to interrogate questions of emotion, identity, desire and social expectation.

The Red Panda as Expanded Menstrual Metaphor

The panda possesses several characteristics that make it effective as a menstrual metaphor. It appears unexpectedly, cannot be completely controlled, changes Meilin's body, creates embarrassment, becomes visible to other people and is closely connected to emotion. Most importantly, Meilin eventually learns that it is not something she must eliminate. The metaphor moves from physiology to identity. Meilin initially believes that the panda is a problem because it interferes with her previous understanding of herself. Her goal is to suppress it through the ritual performed by her family. The ritual is significant because it transforms bodily difference into something that must be removed. The panda is treated as a "beast" and Ming's mother reinforces this understanding when she cries out "The Panda's Dangerous... Outta Control." The description of the panda as dangerous and uncontrollable is central to the film's early construction of transformation. Ming explains the family history through a narrative of containment. The women of the family have traditionally sealed away their pandas. This becomes a powerful metaphor for intergenerational bodily discipline. The family has therefore not merely inherited the panda but also a particular way of understanding it.

This distinction between bodily change and the cultural interpretation of bodily change is important. The problem is not simply that Meilin changes. It is that the changed body threatens the behavioural expectations surrounding her. The panda is physically large, emotionally expressive and difficult to conceal. Bordo's analysis of bodily discipline helps explain why this becomes culturally significant. The ideal feminine body is expected to remain manageable. The panda is not manageable. It is therefore "monstrous" not because it is inherently evil but because it exceeds normative boundaries. Creed's notion of the monstrous-feminine is particularly useful here since the monstrous

female body often represents fears surrounding sexuality, reproduction, blood and bodily instability. Meilin's panda initially participates in this tradition. The beauty and the ideological significance of the film, however is that instead of perpetuating the tradition, it reverses it. The monster is not destroyed or permanently contained instead Meilin ultimately chooses to keep it.

The film makes an explicit use of red colour as a powerful symbol. Red evokes blood, embarrassment, anger, passion and vitality. The panda itself is red, and the film repeatedly uses red as a visual marker of emotional intensity. In this sense, colour becomes an indirect representation of menstrual blood. Rather than depicting menstrual blood realistically, the film transforms its cultural associations into a visual language of red. The result is a representation of menstruation that is accessible to younger audiences without reproducing the shame associated with explicit bodily fluids. More important the colour refuses cleanliness-based symbolism. Red is not represented as contamination. Red becomes the colour of becoming, emotional intensity and vitality. This distinction is central to the film's politics: what is culturally marked as embarrassing or excessive is transformed into something that can be acknowledged and eventually embraced.

Metamorphosis and Agency: “My Panda, My Choice, Mom”

One of the most revealing lines in the film occurs when Meilin asserts, “My panda, my choice, Mom” (*Turning Red*). The line is deliberately playful, but its conceptual importance is substantial. The panda has moved from being an object controlled by the family to becoming part of Meilin's self-definition. The phrase “my panda” establishes ownership of the transformed body. The phrase “my choice” establishes agency. The line therefore marks a transition from bodily regulation to bodily autonomy. It is also significant that Meilin does not simply argue that the panda is harmless. She claims the right to decide what to do with it. The film does not suggest that every bodily impulse should unequivocally be followed. Rather, it insists that maturity includes the ability to participate in decisions concerning one's own changing identity. The movement from containment to agency thus becomes one of the film's central representations of adolescence.

The film makes this argument even clearer near the climax when Meilin tells Ming: “I'm changing, Mom. I'm finally figuring out who I am, but... I'm scared it'll take me away from you.” The line captures the central paradox of adolescence. Change is necessary for identity, but change can threaten existing relationships. Meilin does not want simply to escape her mother. She wants to become herself without losing the relationship. Ming's eventual response is equally important. She recognizes that Meilin has been trying to make everyone happy and tells her not to hold herself back. The maternal relationship therefore changes from control to recognition.

Mother-Daughter Inheritance

The revelation that Ming herself once struggled with the panda makes the conflict intergenerational. Ming's desire to control Meilin is partly shaped by her own experience of having failed to meet her mother's expectations. Her body became a site of familial anxiety and she risks reproducing the same pattern with her daughter. Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution is useful here. "...between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction—and to children; and the institution—which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control" (Rich 13). Rich's distinction helps address the complexity of maternal relationship in *Turning Red*. Maternal love can coexist with cultural expectations concerning obedience and respectability. Ming loves Meilin, but she also wants to protect her from experiences that she herself experienced as painful. Her attempt to contain Meilin's panda is therefore simultaneously an act of care and an act of regulation. The film consequently avoids a simplistic mother-versus-daughter structure. Both are negotiating inherited expectations and Meilin's eventual acceptance of the panda interrupts the transmission of a pattern of bodily suppression from one generation to the next.

The final narration completes the transformation of the metaphor: "We've all got an inner beast. We've all got a messy, loud, weird part of ourselves hidden away. And a lot of us never let it out. But I did. How about you?" (*Turning Red*). This statement expands the panda beyond menstruation. The "beast" is emotional, bodily and psychological. The phrase "hidden away" is especially important because it recalls the cultural history of menstrual concealment while simultaneously extending the metaphor beyond menstruation. The film's final message is therefore not that menstruation should simply be mentioned. It is that experiences associated with bodily difference, emotional intensity and adolescent change should not automatically be hidden.

The film also associates puberty with desire. Meilin and her friends' enthusiasm for 4*Town is comic but significant. Female adolescence is not reduced to biological maturation. It includes attraction, fantasy, friendship and curiosity. This is important because girls are often culturally positioned between two contradictory expectations: they are expected to remain innocent while simultaneously being subjected to increasing sexual visibility. *Turning Red* provides a more complex representation. Meilin can experience desire without becoming a sexual object. Her friendships belong to her. Her body and its fantasies belong to her. The panda thus becomes a metaphor for the emergence of a subject who increasingly recognizes her own desires. Through this expanded metaphor, *Turning Red* presents puberty not as a temporary disturbance that must be overcome but as a process through which bodily change, emotional intensity, desire, familial inheritance and self-definition become

intertwined. The film's significance lies precisely in this movement from concealment to recognition: the transformed body becomes not an obstacle to identity but one of the means through which identity is discovered.

Inside Out: Emotional Transformation, Identity and the Adolescent Self

Inside Out provides a different but complementary model of transformation. Riley is eleven when her family moves from Minnesota to San Francisco. The film places the audience inside her mind, where emotions function as embodied characters. The premise itself is an act of metaphorical transformation. Emotions become bodies, psychology becomes space and memory becomes material. In short, the interior becomes visible. Unlike *Turning Red*, which externalises puberty through a visibly transformed body, *Inside Out* externalises the emotional processes that accompany growing up. Its significance to the present discussion therefore lies less in an explicit menstrual metaphor than in its representation of the changing emotional self.

Joy initially believes that Riley's well-being depends upon maintaining happiness. When Sadness touches a memory that Joy considers important, Joy attempts to prevent her from interfering. In this model of emotional control sadness is treated as a problem. At one point Sadness describes her experience by saying: "Crying helps me slow down and obsess over the weight of life's problems" (*Inside Out*). The humour of the line conceals an important conceptual point: sadness has a function. The film gradually demonstrates that emotional health does not mean eliminating unpleasant feelings but integrating them into a more complex emotional life. This parallels *Turning Red*. Meilin initially wants to eliminate the panda while Riley's emotional system initially treats Sadness as something that should be excluded. Both narratives eventually reject suppression as the definition of maturity.

The film's islands of personality provide a visual model of identity. Riley's identity is not a single stable object. It is constructed from memories, relationships and emotional experiences. When the family relocates, these structures begin to collapse. The collapse can be understood through Erikson's theory of adolescent identity formation. For Erikson, the formation of identity requires the individual to establish continuity between earlier experiences and an emerging sense of self: "The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future" (87). This process requires the individual to reorganize earlier identifications and experiences in response to changing social circumstances. Although Riley is younger than Meilin, *Inside Out* places her at the threshold of this process. The film therefore complements *Turning Red*. If *Turning Red* represents the changing body through the red panda, *Inside Out* represents the changing interior through personification of emotion and materialisation of memory.

The most important transformation in *Inside Out* is Joy's transformation. At the beginning, Joy believes that she must protect Riley from negative emotional states. By the end, she understands that happiness cannot exist independently of sadness. The film therefore rejects emotional purity. This is significant in relation to female adolescence because girls' emotions have historically been associated with irrationality and hormonal instability. *Inside Out* does not deny that hormones and biology matter to development but it refuses the reduction of emotional experience to biological determinism. Emotion is relational. Sadness allows Riley to communicate vulnerability and that vulnerability allows her parents to respond. The emotional system therefore becomes healthier when it becomes more complex. The film's representation of emotional development consequently parallels its broader representation of adolescence as a process of integration rather than purification.

Spirited Away: Liminality, Identity and the Formation of the Adolescent Self

Spirited Away approaches female transformation without an explicit menstrual metaphor. Its contribution to this study lies in its representation of adolescence as liminality. Chihiro enters the spirit world as a frightened child. Her parents' transformation into pigs removes the adult protection upon which she has depended. She must enter the labour system controlled by Yubaba. She must negotiate unfamiliar rules. She must remember her identity. The spirit world therefore functions as a symbolic space between childhood and maturity.

Yubaba's renaming of Chihiro is crucial. The transformation is linguistic rather than anatomical. Chihiro's name is shortened and her identity becomes subject to institutional control. This is comparable to the bodily regulation seen in *Turning Red*. In both films, authority attempts to define the adolescent according to an externally imposed order. The difference is that Chihiro's body does not become monstrous, instead, her identity becomes unstable. Her task is to remember herself. The loss of her name thus becomes a metaphor for the danger of allowing institutional structures to determine who the adolescent subject is permitted to become.

Victor Turner's concept of liminality helps explain Chihiro's position. She exists between categories, occupying what Turner describes as a liminal state in which "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremony" (95). She is no longer simply a child, but she has not become an autonomous adult. The spirit world makes this condition visible. The film's supernatural setting therefore performs a function similar to the red panda. Both are metaphors for an experience that is difficult to represent directly. Yet the two films construct this liminality differently.

Chihiro's transformation is not physical metamorphosis in the same way as Meilin's. It is a transformation in competence. At the beginning, she clings to adults and appears uncertain about her ability to negotiate the unfamiliar world around her. But by the end, she is able to act independently. Her growth does not require the rejection of her childhood. The film departs from the coming-of-age narratives' usual trope of defining maturity as the abandonment of childhood. It offers another model. Chihiro becomes stronger by remembering. She learns to function within the adult world without surrendering her ethical identity. This corresponds to Meilin's decision to retain the panda. Both protagonists become mature without becoming completely different people. The metaphor of metamorphosis associated with puberty and adolescence, as represented in these animated films, suggests an embrace of the holistic self in all its contradictions and complexities rather than a fragmentation of identity into multiple mirrors.

Wolfwalkers: Animal Transformation, Bodily Autonomy and Relational Agency

The film follows Robyn, a young girl whose encounter with Mebh introduces her to the world of the Wolfwalkers. Mebh's ability to transform into a wolf challenges the categories established by the colonial and authoritarian world represented by the Lord Protector. The wolf body is not merely magical, it represents another way of being. *Wolfwalkers* extends the argument into a more explicitly political field. Whereas *Turning Red* locates the boundaries largely within the family and the expectations surrounding femininity, *Wolfwalkers* connects bodily control to political and colonial authority. Robyn's father wants her to conform to the expectations of his profession and the city. Mebh represents the opposite. She is wild, mobile and connected to the forest. The conflict is therefore partly a conflict between controlled and uncontrolled bodies.

This parallels *Turning Red*. Meilin's panda is initially interpreted as something that must be controlled. Mebh's wolf body is similarly treated by authorities as something that must be eliminated. In both films, transformation threatens systems that depend upon fixed categories. The transformed body becomes politically significant precisely because it cannot be easily contained within the identities assigned to it. Robyn's own transformation demonstrates that bodily change can be empowering. The wolf body provides new sensory possibilities and physical freedom. Instead of representing loss, transformation becomes an expansion of agency. This is important because it changes the meaning of bodily difference. The transformed body does not necessarily represent a body that has gone wrong or needs correction. It can represent a body that has acquired possibilities unavailable within the old social order. The wolf therefore functions, like Meilin's panda, as a figure through which the film challenges the assumption that bodily transformation should automatically be understood as danger or disorder.

Another important aspect that is central to the film's politics is the friendship between Robyn and Mebh. Robyn becomes capable of imagining another form of life because Mebh shows it to her. This resembles the role of Meilin's friends. In both films, friendship creates a space in which the transformed body can be accepted rather than disciplined. Transformation is therefore relational. The adolescent does not become autonomous entirely alone. Autonomy develops through relationships that permit experimentation, recognition and alternative ways of understanding the self.

Comparative Discussion

From Monstrosity to Agency: Reimagining Female Transformation

The four films differ substantially in setting and narrative style, but their transformations can be organized around a common question: What happens when a girl's changing body no longer fits the expectations imposed upon it? In *Turning Red*, puberty is figured through the sudden transformation of the adolescent body into a red panda, while menstruation and female desire become part of the narrative of becoming. In *Inside Out*, the bodily changes of adolescence are translated into an emotional upheaval in which feelings acquire an animated life of their own. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro's movement into a supernatural world accompanies a loss and reconstruction of identity, as she is stripped of her name and gradually learns to inhabit a changed sense of self. In *Wolfwalkers*, the transformation of a girl into a wolf unsettles the boundary between human and animal, suggesting that the female body can inhabit identities beyond those prescribed by social order. Each film begins with a disruption: the protagonist can no longer simply remain as she was. Yet these films do not necessarily represent bodily transformation as a condition that must be corrected or contained. Instead, metamorphosis becomes a way of imagining female adolescence as a process of becoming—messy, unsettling, and sometimes frightening, but also opening the possibility of embracing a more complex and holistic self.

From Suppression to Self-Integration: Reimagining the Adolescent Female Body

All the four animated movies discussed reimagine the adolescent female body as a movement from suppression to self-integration. *Turning Red* provides the clearest example. Meilin could complete the ritual and permanently seal away the panda. Instead, she chooses to keep it. The decision is not simply rebellious, but integrative. She accepts that maturity means living with complexity. *Inside Out* follows a similar logic. Joy does not destroy Sadness, she learns to work with her. *Spirited Away* does not erase Chihiro's earlier identity, instead she remembers it. *Wolfwalkers* does not restore a strict boundary between human and animal but it questions the boundary itself. The shared movement is from suppression toward integration.

From the Monstrous-Feminine to the Expansive Self: Reimagining Female Identity

Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine helps identify the historical anxiety surrounding female bodily transformation. Female bodies become threatening when they are represented as excessive, sexual, reproductive or uncontrolled. The four films complicate this tradition. Meilin's panda is excessive but lovable. Riley's emotions are disruptive but necessary. Chihiro's vulnerability becomes strength. Mebh's animality becomes freedom. The transformed body is no longer necessarily the enemy of identity. It becomes the condition through which a more complex identity emerges. The films suggest the importance of embracing the multiplicity of the adolescent self. The shift is central to the films' representation of female identity because it allows difference and contradiction to become parts of the self rather than signs of its failure.

From Biology to Becoming: The Cultural Lives of Puberty

The comparison also reveals that puberty, although grounded in a biological process, does not carry a single cultural meaning. Each film places adolescent transformation within a different network of family, society, labour, spirituality, ecology, and emotional life. *Turning Red* locates puberty within family history and intergenerational inheritance, making the changing female body a site where cultural expectations and inherited anxieties converge. *Spirited Away* connects transformation with labour, naming, and spiritual liminality, as Chihiro's changing sense of self emerges through her movement across unfamiliar social and supernatural spaces. *Wolfwalkers* places bodily transformation within questions of colonial authority, ecology, and freedom, allowing the girl's changing body to challenge the boundaries imposed by social order. *Inside Out*, meanwhile, translates the upheavals of adolescence into an emotional and psychological vocabulary, presenting growing up as a process of reorganizing the inner self. The differences among these films demonstrate that puberty cannot be understood as a universal experience with a single meaning. The biological process may be broadly shared, but its meanings are produced through the cultural worlds which the adolescent body comes to inhabit and understand itself. Animation makes these cultural meanings visible by turning bodily, emotional, and psychological changes into forms that can be seen, transformed and reimagined. Puberty, therefore becomes not merely a biological passage but a process of becoming shaped by the stories, relationships, values, and worlds surrounding the adolescent girl.

From Concealment to Conversation: The Politics of Menstrual Representation

The most significant transformation in these films is representational rather than biological. Animation makes the changing female body visible, giving form to experiences that have historically been pushed into silence and concealment. Menstrual culture, in particular, has often demanded that menstruation

remain private, hidden, and unspoken. Contemporary animation increasingly challenges this demand by bringing the changing adolescent body into the visible and narratable world of popular culture. *Turning Red* is particularly significant in this regard because it places menstruation within the apparently ordinary world of family entertainment, using the red panda as a metaphor through which the physical and emotional turbulence of puberty can be represented without shame. The significance lies not in the assumption that every child watching the film will interpret the panda explicitly as menstruation. Rather, the significance lies in the fact that menstruation becomes narratable. What has traditionally been concealed can now be represented; what can be represented can be discussed; and what can be discussed can have its stigma challenged. In this sense, contemporary animation does more than depict puberty: it participates in changing the cultural language through which the menstruating and adolescent female body can be seen, understood, and spoken about.

Limitations and Critical Considerations

A celebratory account of these films must nevertheless recognize the limits of representation. The use of metaphor can make menstruation more visible and discussable, but it can also distance audiences from the material realities of menstruation. The red panda, after all, is not menstrual blood; the metaphor cannot fully represent menstrual pain, irregular cycles, reproductive-health inequalities, or the experiences of those for whom menstruation is physically or medically difficult. Its contribution is primarily representational and cultural. Nor can these films provide a universal account of female adolescence. Puberty is experienced through different social, cultural, economic, racial, religious, sexual, and geographical contexts. These films are neither complete representations of adolescent female experience nor insignificant popular texts. Their importance lies in what they make possible: they open representational space, make previously difficult experiences more speakable, and challenge the assumption that adolescent bodies must become invisible precisely when they are undergoing some of their most significant transformations.

Conclusion

This article has examined menstruation, puberty, and bodily metamorphosis in contemporary animated cinema through a comparative reading of *Turning Red*, *Inside Out*, *Spirited Away*, and *Wolfwalkers*. Drawing on feminist body studies, abjection theory, gender performativity, affect theory, intersectionality, animation studies, and theories of identity formation, the study argues that contemporary animation is developing a distinctive visual language for representing female adolescence. In these films, bodily change becomes a site through which identity, emotion, cultural inheritance, autonomy, and belonging can be imagined.

Turning Red is central to this transformation because it brings menstruation and puberty into the narrative space of mainstream family animation. The red panda begins as a metaphor for bodily change but expands into a representation of emotional intensity, desire, friendship, cultural inheritance, and selfhood. Most importantly, Meilin does not have to eliminate the panda in order to become acceptable. The panda becomes part of her. The film therefore reconfigures the monstrous-feminine: the transformed female body is not inherently monstrous but becomes threatening when social expectations demand that femininity remain controlled, quiet, and contained.

The other films extend this argument into different facets of adolescent transformation. *Inside Out* makes emotional upheaval visible by giving emotions bodies, suggesting that maturity requires integration rather than the suppression of difficult feelings. *Spirited Away* represents adolescence through liminality, loss and the reconstruction of identity while *Wolfwalkers* connects bodily transformation with autonomy, freedom, and resistance to authority. Considered together, the films reveal a movement from concealment to visibility, from shame to recognition, from control to negotiation, and from transformation as crisis to transformation as becoming.

This movement has particular significance for the representation of menstruation. Menstruation has historically been positioned as something that should remain private and hidden despite being an ordinary bodily experience. Contemporary animation challenges this contradiction by giving bodily transformation visual and narrative form. The significance of the menstrual metaphor is not that it reproduces every material reality of menstruation, but that it makes an experience that has often been concealed narratable. Animation therefore does more than represent puberty. It animates it. It gives form to the changing body, bodies to emotions, and movement to identity. Its capacity for metamorphosis makes it particularly suited for representing adolescence not as a problem to be corrected but as a process of becoming. The adolescent body need not become invisible, to become acceptable. It can become visible and remain worthy of acceptance.

The metaphor of metamorphosis thus becomes more than a description of bodily change. It offers a way of rethinking female adolescence itself. This is perhaps the most important cultural contribution of contemporary animated representations of puberty. They do not merely tell young viewers that change is inevitable. They suggest that change can be inhabited, negotiated and even embraced. Puberty, in these narratives, is not simply a biological transition. It is a process of becoming. And animation, with its extraordinary capacity for metamorphosis, is one of the most appropriate cultural forms through which that becoming can be imagined. Contemporary animated cinema creates a cultural space in which puberty can be seen not simply as a biological transition, but as a complex and deeply embodied process of becoming.

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