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## **Mothers And Daughters—Creating Anew**

I had waited for this great occasion for many months. My mother and I had anticipated the event with excitement and pride. But when it happened I had to hear it from my mother, with that note of accusation in her voice for not being present at the auspicious minute! Another stab at my late working hours.

My daughter had “attained age,” she had entered into womanhood and to put it plainly, she had started menstruating. When I ran upstairs to find her, she rose from her bed to hug me. There was something happening inside me which was neither pure joy nor pure sorrow. Yet, I could feel both. She was giggling with tears in her eyes. I hugged her to me and traced her face with my fingers asking, “Mahal (daughter), does it hurt?” She moulded her body to mine and I could feel the negative response in the movement of her head against my breast. All I could think was, “she’s too young. Forty years of monthly bleeding, cramps and backaches....” And I hugged her closer.

When my mother in her usual way said, “let her stay back from school today,” I responded to it with the memory of what had happened 26 years earlier. The scene was different in that I was terrified that I had a wound—how else could one explain the sudden evidence of bright red blood on one’s panties. I had a geography test, which I didn’t want to miss as it was not only my favourite subject, but it was also important for my mid-term grades. My pleadings with my mother to allow me to go to school—properly bandaged—had no effect at all. The verdict was 21 days of solitary confinement with restricted diet of eggs, sesame seed oil, eggplant, and black grain pancakes. So, I missed that geography test and many other tests for 21 days, while my marks dwindled and my body blossomed.

Twenty-six years later, I sit with my daughter and explain the reasons and beliefs behind the special diet and restrictions during the first few weeks

following the initial menstruation. With my mother I negotiated 21 days down to seven days. As this had happened on a Monday night, I proposed that we have the “bathing ceremony” on Sunday and thereby make it okay for my daughter to go back to school after seven days.

When we made plans about whom to invite, I asked my daughter if she would like to invite some of her friends. She was very sure about not wanting any of her friends to know. A year ago, when I had anticipated the burst of growth at any time, I had explained to my daughter what happens to our bodies and the cultural tradition of celebrating it with family and friends. I was determined that history should not repeat itself and that my daughter should not experience it as an unknown terror. During that discussion we had also talked about who she’d like to invite. I remember her saying that she would like it to be a party for young women (with the exception of her twin brother). But when the opportunity presented itself she did not want to invite her friends. So we settled for her maternal uncle, aunts, cousins, and close family friends. Next, we had to sort out what to wear. My daughter’s question was, as always, “what did you wear?” She chose a long skirt with a fitting blouse up to the waist and a *thaavani* (also referred to as “half-saree”), the symbol of entering womanhood. Just as I had negotiated with my mother to lessen the days of seclusion, my daughter negotiated with me the length of time she would have to be “dressed-up” on the day of the ceremony. Finally, she agreed to wear the “half-saree” for two hours while all the pictures were taken and I agreed that she could change into her mini-skirt and bodysuit afterwards.

Following our Tamil cultural tradition my younger brother (in the absence of my elder brother), put milk on my daughter’s head to initiate the bathing ceremony. Next, my aunts, and other women friends (only married women!) followed. My mother and I were the last to bless her, pray that all impurities be washed away, and that she grow into a woman. Once the bathing was over, wrapping her in a white cloth and with reminders to keep her eyes closed she was led into a room where the traditional lamp was lit beside the Bible and a picture of Christ. It was tradition to open one’s eyes on light and something symbolic of one’s faith, following the bathing ceremony. Then, it was such joy to dress her with the help of a dear friend with flowers, anklets, and bangles to match the “half-saree.” Once my daughter was ready, her father was called to come and bless her.

From the day she started menstruating my prayer for her has been for a safe, violence-free life, filled with respect and dignity. That’s my prayer for all our daughters here in the West, in the East, in the North, and in the South.