Memories of certain events from childhood can still be vivid in adulthood. I cannot exactly remember the years but like a face from a distant past some events lurk. A certain young girl, dark in colour and somewhat short in stature, whose guardian was known to our family was brought into our home to see whether she would grow out of her affliction. She seemed to show some strange behaviours. This case was discussed by me in the book, the lure of noma [1]. Being a young boy then, I neither knew what puberty meant nor whether the girl was at puberty. From my viewpoint today, given her looks and the social status it was likely. My memory says that she was only referred to as a girl not a woman. Girls at puberty especially maidservants were known to have the tendency for such strange behaviours. That experience subconsciously led me to my work on puberty rites.

I am now ashamed that I didn’t refer to Blood Bread and Roses by Ms. Judy Grahn in my writings, before this review now being written about ten years after first expressing my opinions on the rituals of menarche. I admire Late Prof. Stephen Jay Gould for his pioneering views about the scientific knowledge. All good ideas need not to be in the form of tightly written journal articles. He set an example by being bold enough to write some of his brilliant scientific opinions for popular columns. I understand almost all of the academic community treat my ideas expressed in a series of accessible papers on the subject of seclusion of girls at puberty with certain amount of disdain. I am neither a feminist nor an anthropologist. I am neither European nor a scholar on European archaeology nor art. I am neither an academic nor a person with any acclaimed credentials like a well-known scientist, philosopher, writer or a poet. Thus, I didn’t have any standing whatsoever above Ms. Grahn’s was to ignore her work. Today, I feel being unfair to the book I am now reviewing. In spite of all of that, I then thought I had a reason. When I first came across Ms. Grahn’s book, the authour’s view that menstrual blood attracting dogs led to the seclusion of girls by sending them up trees or into thickets made me really weary of her work. I believe this is unfair treatment of her work on my part and irrespective of my strong reservations, I should have read and mentioned this book in my previous work. But I am glad that I am now making amends to correct that omission. To facts to emerge all opinions should be pondered upon.

Etymological Arguments, Metaforms and Myths in a Feministic Worldview

The authour had used an impressive collection of bibliographical material. The book extensively covers the two main rites of puberty in the Golden Bough [2] that forbid the pubescent girls seeing the sun and touching the ground. She also mentions the restriction on the use of water and the taboos on scratching herself by a menstruant. Ms Grahn
introduced the term metaforms that is the shortened reference, like metaphor, to menstruation and the associated acts or forms of cultural instructions such as rituals and ceremonies that connects the menstruation with a mental principle such as measuring and sacredness. The metaforms can be physical, mental or spiritual. She has four groups of metaforms, namely, wilderness, cosmetikos, narrative and material. Wilderness metaform related to menstrual ‘blood’ is about how the menstruation can be linked to ideas or amenities arising from our days in wilderness. While cosmetikos metaform includes human inventions such as fashion and cooking (i.e. bread) the narrative metaform encompasses our creative genius giving rise to numeracy and mathematical skills. The material metaform tagged with ‘roses’ represents our materialistic innovations such as trade and payments.

The author’s primary objective is to theorise the interaction between the female and the civilisation. She proposes that the connection between the menstruation entwined with the related rites and practices provides the backdrop needed for the humans to invent the human civilisation as we know it. In the wild where the blood thirsty wild dogs roamed, the menstruants had to stay in a hut not to see the sun and sit on a chair not to touch the ground. According to Ms. Grahn, because of its relationship with the moon, menstruation is also the source of geometry, mathematics and the ‘formal measurement’. The formal measurement, according to Ms. Grahn, is the combination of numbers used in rituals and sacred forms such as triangle and circle. She also claims that “the most prominent numbers of cosmetikos --- measuring the separations of menstrual creation (five), the days of lunar death (three), and the directions of the oriented earth (four)” (p.169) form sides of a right-angled triangle. This seems to be a rather tenuous argument. But for her to make the all-encompassing connection between human achievements and being female, such an argument was required.

Ms. Grahn’s work refers to the etymology of words to find reasons to link civilization with menstruation. She found the links between the menstruation and taboos and rituals in etymological context. In my opinion, such associations are superficial and cannot take us, in a meaningful way, to the prehistoric times where the language was rudimentary or in a form unknown to us. Ms. Grahn has used amazingly large number of mythical stories to prove that various cultural elements such as use of cosmetics, cloths etc came about because of menstruation. In the book, many a time, an opinion on menstruation was substantiated by another opinion on a folk tradition, some etymological consideration or an anecdote.

**Moon Rising**

She writes "According to anthropologist Prof. Chris Knight, the menstrual cycle of primates varies greatly, some species having a seven-day cycle, while others go all the way to thirty-nine days.......Only the human cycle, at twenty-nine and a half days, coincides with the cycle of the moon’ (page 7). Not only humans, primates including great apes menstruate, even though, not in the same volumes. Do we assume that they too, still living in the wild..."
exposed to carnivores sniffing blood, practise the habit of seclusion, not in the same elaborate form, as the ‘protohuman’ or prehistoric women could have done? Staying away from biological aspects of the implications, one wonders whether the author trusting Prof. Chris Knight’s theory wants us to believe that all women menstruate in sync with moon cycle and this is universally true. Given the folkloric assertions provided by her, let us assume this to be true. Ms. Grahn believes the menstrual synchronicity provided them a yardstick outside of their bodies, i.e. phases of the moon. This yardstick helps them to appreciate the darkness during the ‘collective menstrual seclusion’ and the light of the dawn at the emergence from the seclusion. Going into seclusion at the new moon and coming out of it during the full moon inculcate in them, Ms. Grahn writes, a worldview extremal to their bodies. It also provided sense of numbers. Ms. Grahn is very vague on how these happened. It is very difficult to figure out how the digits of one’s hands can have less influence on the foundation of counting than the moon phases. The ‘internal’ ten digits right in one’s face should be more impactful, one would rightly argue, than the ‘external’ moon phases that are far apart in time and dependent on the fickle weather.

Just for the sake of curiosity, in spite of the availability of many similar studies, I conducted a simple study on the moon’s daily motion and one aspect of daily human behaviour (the results of this investigation that uses a methodological point of view different to many previous studies in this area of research, is available at the following web address: https://hcommons.org/deposits/item/hc:27181). My view was if the moon was so influential that it makes women menstruate along with its phases and synchronises the menstrual cycles of them living in close proximity, it should have some impact on human behaviour in general. Some researchers refer to human tidal waves caused by moon’s influence. Driving is a very prevalent modern behaviour in multitude of places all around the globe. Drivers tend to avoid traffic accidents due to economic and practical reasons. If an accident happens, based on the research quoted in the above paper, that can largely be due to factors like driver errors. Human tidal waves, if they exist, can be assumed to have an impact on such erratic behaviours. But any such influence of the moon’s illumination or its distance from the earth could not be observed in the traffic accident data. Our prehistoric ancestors might well have noticed the disconnect between the physical world and their perceptions. Ms Grahn could argue that it is not the reality but the perceptions that matter. This may be true. However, one wonders why such unsubstantiated cultural traits prevailed over millions of years. I tend to believe that the root of the belief on menstrual rites was more supernatural rather than natural and hence, is not subject to the burden of proof. The unseen force of magic persisted as these practices are not part of rational argument based on physical realities but a form of logic, that I refer to as “rule of thumb logic” [1].
Writing about “the Venus of Willendorf”, a prehistoric Venus figurine from Austria, Ms. Grahn states that she represents “a royal menstruant” a term that was defined in the book. The author seems to imply that the chambers within the pyramids that do not hold bodies of the Pharos are hut-like and were used to hold royal menstruants. She appears to believe that the menstruant represented by the Venus of Willendorf is a royal and thus, was worthy enough to be represented in a figurine. Ms. Grahn also believes that her face was covered by the close-fitting cap pulled over her face. This preventing the light protects the landscape and people from her glance. She noted the red colour on the figurine represents the red ochre used by women. Unlike Ms. Grahn, I didn’t look at the prehensile hands that prevented scratching. In difference to Ms. Grahn, I focused on the tapering legs and their connection to the concept of not to touch the ground [3]. She also believes that the fatness is not due to pregnancy but due to the long seclusion. These are the views I also share with her. She came to the conclusion about the connection between the Venus figurines and the menstruation before I did but from a different angle. These are profoundly intuitive ideas that are also creative in conception. In effect, we both believe that the prehistoric Venus figurines represent the menstruants in seclusion. A key difference between us is that hers is a passing reference to the figurines in a theory that covers everything about human civilization. For me, the figurines were about girls at puberty rather than any menstruant in seclusion and had no broader feminist ideology. I simply considered the puberty rites and their apparent link to the Palaeolithic Venus figurines and in turn, to the origin of religion.

Our initial viewpoints on the secluded girls were sharply polarised on two aspects of the seclusion rites. Ms. Grahn started from the symbolic meaning between the rites and their depiction in the form of art mobilier. In my view, the more important dimension was the seclusion and its supernatural aspect. I believe that the seclusion resulted from the pubescents’ supposed supernatural powers. Ms. Grahn treats seclusion as a result of avoiding blood sniffing wild dogs. It is a fair question to ask how the association between the seclusion and supernatural powers work. In my article on the puberty rites and prehistoric Venuses [3] I did not express a conclusive argument to isolate the factors. But my preferred view is that the Venus figurines represented a girl at puberty who was idolised for her supernatural powers and attained the status of a goddess everyone else wished to become. Sir Frazer refers to the pubescents as those who stay between ‘heaven and earth’[2]. Another group of people who were between heaven and earth were the royalty. The ancient kings, only in historic times with available records though, were considered divine. This seems to establish the special
status the pubescent enjoyed. Thus, it is not ludicrous to assume that the Venus figurines from the Palaeolithic period represents some special person, perhaps, a deity.

Some Concluding Remarks

It is very difficult to justify the theorizing, in its overarching form, Ms. Grahn engages in. I cannot find enough evidence in her book to convince myself that the civilisation was a result of the menstrual rituals and the related symbolism. Folklore, myths and etymology cannot be strong evidence to prove everything that is claimed. If language is a recent development and the menstrual taboos started before the start of the language, the way, certain words in a language started, can hardly bear witness to the practices before language. It can remind us of one of the arguments Thomas Paine used in his book “Age of Reason” against the Biblical story of Genesis that mentions three days and three nights before the sun and moon that were created on the fourth day. We now know that only the sun causes the day and night. Furthermore, it is difficult to interpret all the symbolism associated with a mythological story as there are no written or oral interpretations about folklore. Taken out of proper temporal and cultural context, they may mean something different to its original intention. Many such stories can also be simply a figment of imagination with no reference to any cultural context. Folklore, like the tales from Panchatantra that found its way into the folk tales in Europe, can also represent a form of cultural advice. I am not convinced that the feminist viewpoint expressed in the book about the emergence of civilisation was argued well enough if it could have been factually argued at all.

References