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**SILENCE AS A TOOL OF OPPRESSION IN KIM HARRINGTON'S  
REVENGE OF THE RED CLUB**

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**Abstract:**

*There are still some topics, particularly related to women, which are considered taboo even now. Though there are various markers that separate women from each other, menstruation is one thing that unites them all universally. It is both subjective and objective to every woman. In countries like India, which is rooted deep in its tradition and culture, discussion about menstruation is still a taboo. Literacy about menstruation, body, desire is denied to women so that they can stay silenced and marginalized. Many developed countries deny this right and freedom to women even today. Literature proves to be a perfect platform to talk and create awareness about the rights denied. The American author Kim Harrington's novel *Revenge of the Red Club* (2019) shows that no matter where a girl or a woman is from, she cannot be open about her menstruation at all; body literacy is denied to her. The novel is about a Hawking Middle School eighth grader Riley Dunne who fights for the period power. The aim of this paper is to analyze how girls in the school are silenced when it comes to the matter of menstruation. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's theory – *Spiral of Silence* is used to support this analysis.*

**Keywords:** *Revenge of the Red Club, Kim Harrington, Spiral of Silence, Period Power, etc.*

Many writers have handled the theme of silence in different aspects. It has been one of the most sought after themes in literature. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Language* lists the following as definitions of Silence: (i) a complete lack of noise or sound; (ii) a situation when nobody is speaking; (iii) a situation in which somebody refuses to talk about something or to answer questions. When it comes to literature, silence is regarded not as the absence of voice but as the lack of voice. The popular adage 'Silence is not empty; it is full of answers' holds true in real life. Though silence can leave a powerful impact, a void that demands attention, it is mostly associated with suffering and powerlessness. Silence is synonymous with suffering in general. Those who are in the lowest rungs of the society, those who are in the margins are constantly pressurized to be silent in many ways. They are not given voice and not allowed to voice out their concerns even when they want to. Children, women, old aged persons, people with disabilities, homosexuals, etc. are silenced in our society. Women suffer the most when this situation prevails in homes and workstations.

Many armchair academicians, critics, researchers and activists are carrying out many activities and awareness programs regarding silence. Silence and its consequences are being



researched widely in the field of psychology. Many foundational theorists have explored, researched and written on silence. While Sigmund Freud has associated silence with the lack of free thoughts, Carl Jung discussed it positively. The German political scientist Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann proposed the famous Spiral of Silence theory. The theory shows how an individual's response changes according to the societal perception. Newmann formulated this theory while tracking the 1965 German elections. She was researching how the public polls and opinions affected the elections thereby formulating the Spiral of Silence theory. Newmann proposed that a person tends to rethink their position, when he/she is not in the majority. Obviously, they retreat to silence because of their minority position. People who belong to minority position try to voice out their opinion against the majority. But it is not always that their opinions are heard or they are given the chance in the least. There is a possibility that even if they voice out their opinions, they will go unheard and be marginalized. Hence in order to avoid this stance, many tend to stay silent. This silence comes as a result of fear of isolation (Noelle-Neumann). British-Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid shares the same opinion. He terms the process when one gets silenced as spiraling. Hamid elaborates that when a person gets to know that his/her opinion is not going to be valid because he/she does not belong to majority, then the person is pushed towards silence. Many critics such as C.J. Glynn, J. Shanahan, A.F. Hayes, W. Donsbach and M. Csikszentmihalyi have also researched the concept of silence.

Menstrual narratives are very rare in literature. Fictional narratives rarely talk about this menstruation business. Authors mention the phases of menstruation as a passing reference as if that is something inconsequential. But without it a woman is not considered woman at all. It becomes the defining quality of a woman to prove her womanhood. "That the menstrual cycle is at times declared the defining feature of womanhood, but is just as often rendered insignificant, raises questions about its place and effects in the reciprocal relations between the body, the subject, and the social order—relationships that psychoanalysis addresses and transforms in theory and practice" (Hatch, 2). It is just a starting point of more things to come – pregnancy, childbirth, menopause – which are again markers of womanhood.

The setting of the story is Hawking Middle School in Massachusetts. The protagonist of the story is Riley Dunne, an eighth grader; she holds many feathers in her hat. She is her school newspaper's investigative journalist and the chairman of the Red Club in her school. The story is told in her perspective. Her close friends are Ava and Cee Butler. The readers get to know about the 'Aunt Flo' when the new girl Julia has her first period. "Julia has an uninvited guest – Aunt Flo, the most obnoxious, unwelcome visitor. And Julia certainly hadn't been expecting Flo to show up. I didn't think she even knew she was here. But due to that dark red stain on her white jeans, the whole class would know soon" (Harrington, 5-6). This is a very common occurrence in schools and even in our day-to-day lives. Many girls experience their first period without knowing anything about it. It is because our society has not encouraged people to talk about these stuffs as they are considered taboo. In the novel too, menstruation is described by many words except period and menstruation as the girls are trained not to use those words. The first term the readers come across is Aunt Flo. When menstruation hits Julia, a new comer to the school, Riley Dunne covers for her. She yanks her hoodie and ties it around Julia's waist. This simply shows Riley's thoughtfulness and her experience in the area. Almost everyone in the class has seen the red patch of Julia and boys



have started sniggering; but it is only Riley that acts fast. It is because Riley Dunne is a club member and she has responsibilities.

Soon the readers are introduced to the Red Club. The club is exclusive to the girls who had their periods. There is a special locker allotted for the members of the Red Club and Riley Dunne has access to it. There are always supplies ready for any girl who is in need: "I reached for the bag on the top shelf. "Pads and tampons are in here." Then I showed her the bottom shelf. "Three pairs of sweatpants in there, various sizes. Just wash them and return them to the locker" (Harrington, 10). Girls do not get into the club as soon as they have their first period; it does not work that way. The Red Club meets in the library every Wednesday after school. Providing supplies is not the only goal of the Red Club. It creates solidarity among the girls. The Red Club has a way of bringing girls together. Again this is a universal principle that girls tend to bond over these things in general. Stella and Camille Flores in the novel are polar opposites but are united by the Red Club. It is where the girls also get to know about heating pads for their cramps. Club attendance is not mandatory but everyone is encouraged to attend the club meetings.

Even though the setting is a US Middle School, things related to menstruation is projected awkward. The girls cannot openly talk about their period problems with one another; no teacher is ready to guide them too. Above all, the boys in the school put the girls through hell when it comes to periods. They crack jokes, make them hide their faces in embarrassment for no fault of theirs. Riley Dunne's dialogue brings out all the hardships faced by girls during menstruation: "I haven't had it *that* long. . . and believe me, it's not that great. Once you get it, you'll wish you hadn't been in such a hurry. We're talking cramps, zits, bloating, mood swings. Sometimes I look in the toilet and it's like I sacrificed a goat" (Harrington, 19). Her close friend Cee seconds this opinion as how people, even girls and women at times, view menstrual blood as disgusting.

Harrington also describes the physical pain undergone by the girls in a humorous way. "A normally quiet sixth grader named Kristy who'd been inducted last month raised her hand. "My cramps are so bad. I feel like there's an angry little man in my stomach, just repeatedly punching my uterus" (Harrington, 25). This is what is undergone by girls and women all over the world but nobody does talk about this openly. Our society does not encourage this kind of discussion. Even in many developed countries, people hesitate to talk about menstruation openly and since it involves blood, it is considered inappropriate too. But an exclusive club for this formed by girls and for girls gives ample opportunities for them to talk about things and get them sorted. "No, not gross! That's the point of this club. It's where we can ask questions and talk about this kind of stuff and *not* be judged. Not be called gross" (Harrington, 27). And mothers are to be blamed too. For instance Riley Dunne's mother never had menstruation talk with her daughter. On the other hand, Cee's mother celebrated Cee's womanhood on the day of her first period. School teachers are very similar to mothers in general. They give an introduction about menstruation without ever explaining anything in detail as if the introduction will help them sail through the entire course. Harrington beautifully describes this through Riley Dunne's feelings:

When Cee got her period, her mom celebrated her "womanhood" and baked her a cake. A cake! When I told my mom that I had received my



first visit from Cousin Red, she nodded grimly and said, “The lower cabinet in the bathroom has supplies.” That was it. No words of wisdom. Certainly no celebration of womanhood. It was treated like a shameful secret (Harrington, 35).

Riley’s mother acts as a universal marker for mothers who never talk about menstruation and the likes. Even during the game played at the family dinner, Riley’ mother discourages everyone when there is something connected to periods. “Danny, please. I’m glad you’re learning in health class, but women’s trouble is not an appropriate topic for the dinner table” (Harrington, 39). On the other hand, she feels very happy to take Riley to shopping and encourages her to do girl things more. Even her grandmother is old school and she criticizes Riley when she wears tight jeans. “In addition to never having moved on from 1950s fashion sense, Grandma had weird feelings about men and women splitting household chores. The fight after she’d found out Dad did his own laundry still echoed somewhere in the house’s walls” (Harrington, 86). Harrington through humour brings out the very important issue here – how girls are silenced in general.

Principal Pickford also voices out the same. He shuts down the club informing Riley that many parents are complaining about the existence of such club. Another club member shares her grief: “My mom won’t let me. I asked her to buy tampons because I told her that the other girls in the club said they’re fine. But she said I’m not old enough and got upset. She said she doesn’t think a club like that should be in school. I’m sorry” (Harrington 44). Mothers are not ready to talk about it with their daughters and they prohibit their daughters to talk about this with their friends. The thing is this is not discussed with fathers too. Riley expresses disappointment over this. Her father literally supports her in everything but she finds it difficult to talk about this subject to him. Similarly, her father despite being close to Riley does not encourage her to talk about menstruation with him. During family dinner, when the topic comes up he simply leaves the discussion to his wife and stays silent.

Of course he didn’t get it. Dad didn’t know what it felt like to have to hide a tampon in our hand as you walked to the bathroom. But you couldn’t take your backpack with you because then the whole class would know your dirty secret. How if you shook out an Advil from your purse in mixed company, you’d claim a headache before you admitted you had cramps. How if you got mad at a boy, he’d ask if it was “that time of the month” because you couldn’t possibly have a legitimate reason to be angry. Dad didn’t get it (Harrington, 41).

In order to make the girls not to think of the Red Club, the school Principal implements dress code on everyone. The reason for this is if the girls are not dressed properly, the boys get distracted then. One of the parents makes serious accusation: “Not the club, no. But a few mothers complained about rules not being enforced. For example, Mrs. Scruggs spoke at length about the dress code and how the administration needs to start taking it seriously and enforcing it so the body aren’t distracted. Apparently, her son had some problems focusing on his work” (Harrington, 73). Parents opine the same thing and the Principal has no other option



to shut down the club. He simply tells Riley, “Parents think these things need to be discussed at homes” (Harrington, 97). Following a dress code in a school is not a problem, but when it turns to body shaming, it becomes the main issue among the students. Stella gets dress-coded as she is too curvy though Riley wears the same dress as hers. Stella rages: “I’ve always loved my body. . . I’m curvy. I’ve got things other girls don’t” (Harrington, 128). The readers also come to know of the period metaphors in the text. This reflects the present scenario of the girls now. Harrington names this as “period metaphors” (Harrington, 182). The various metaphors are as follows: “Aunt Flo”, “Cousin Red”, “Flood day” (Harrington 177), “The tomato soup”, “cotton pony”, “painters”, “the great flood”, “red badge of courage”, “girl flu” (Harrington, 182). This is very common and can be observed in today’s teens.

Principal Pickford implements severe restrictions to silence these girls. The first one is to disband the red club and taking hold of the school’s newspaper. Riley and the members have got no say in this. He does not openly restrict them but takes control of their club by being an advisor to them. The students cannot possibly deny or defy this because they need a moderator anyway. The next step he takes is to dress code them. This dress code only gets applied to the girls and not to the boys; since girls are the major distraction for the boys as complained by the parents.

The School Management tries to silence the girls in many ways possible. Riley and Cee form a plan to get back at the Management. They want to show that they cannot be silenced and should not be too; they are not doing anything wrong. All they want is a little bit of freedom to discuss their problems which cannot be discussed anywhere else.

Once the club is shut down, their locker is confiscated and all the supplies in the locker are removed and are completely inaccessible to the girls. This is one way of silencing them. But the girls do not want to back down easily. They hatch a plan to get back at the Management - “maxi-pad prank” (Harrington, 144). This is the revenge plan they hatch up to come against the Management. Riley sends out a message to the girls to carry pads and tampons openly to get back at the teachers. Some boys also join in this and support the girls. But this goes in vain too as the Principal and the parents are not ready to see their kids committing shenanigans and getting disciplined for this cause.

The second plan they implement is to wear leggings and come to school; to come in the dress which is prohibited. This is their way of showing their protest against their silencing by the Management.

But as soon as we passed through the double doors of the entrance, everything was wrong. Girls in leggings were already sitting on the floor of the hallway, lined up outside the office. And, even worse, everyone else seemed to not be wearing leggings. My eyes darted around the hall, taking in girls’ outfits – jeans, khakis, skirts – the vast majority were not following the plan. And when they noticed me and Cee, they cast their eyes down and hurried away (Harrington, 187)

But the result is not as expected but Riley cannot take this down on girls. Riley is devastated after this and she becomes silent. Cee asks her to divert her attention for now and she advises Riley to set up her blog which she has been postponing for a long time. Riley’s mother is only



too happy to let her do this and Riley posts her first article about the Red Club and it becomes viral.

Once her mother understands her daughter's pain, she is the one who helps Riley to break out of her silence. It is she who encourages Riley in the first place: "I know we don't have to be all our mothers. I can see that in what a free, outspoken young woman you have become. You're nothing like me. . . It's hard for people to change, if they grew up a certain way or find themselves stuck in their ways" (Harrington, 199). She accompanies Riley to meet Principal Pickford and gives him the song that has been much due.

Riley rightly points out the things which should be improved and which should be corrected from students' side. "This wasn't the first time I'd been in Principal Pickford's office. I wasn't a troublemaker, not in the traditional sense. But I didn't back down from the truth. . ." (Harrington, 13). Riley uses her superskill, the words to win Pickford to her side. Riley Dunne's special skill is with the words. She finds her way through words. "But my dad said that sometimes it took years for someone to find their superskill. I was lucky: I found mine early on. Words" (Harrington, 17). Luckily with the help of her words and her real belief in the Red Club, she saves the Club. The novel ends on a positive note. The article written by Riley in her blog seems gains more attention and a prominent reporter notices it and shares it on Twitter. Cee explains her: "Sometime today you went viral. . . Everyone's been sharing it far and wide, and it crossed the Twitter feed of some big-time reporter. She reposted it to all her followers. And then thousands of other people retweeted. And it just blew up from there. I can't even keep up." (Harrington, 241)

When Riley makes her argument in a convincing way stressing the importance of the Red Club, the school Principal seems to understand his mistake. Above all, Riley wants their opinions to be heard and not to be silenced. She is appointed as a student representative in the upcoming School Committee Meetings, the newspaper is restored and more importantly the Red Club is restored. The beauty is that nobody has any idea about the origin of the Red Club. This is one stock question Riley faces every time when a new member joins the Club and that is what it makes the club significant. This suggests the universal nature of the Red Club.

The Spiral of Silence theory fits this story so well. The girls try to voice out their opinion against the injustices but they are silenced. When they gather support from other girls, initially they all agree to the plan of maxi-pad and going against the dress code. But they are silenced by their parents and more importantly by the school rules. Principal Pickford openly warns them that they would be suspended and subject to severe actions. True to his words, he also catches few girls and makes them bring their parents to college to meet him. And their parents are given a detailed report of their children's activities and the student offenders are suspended. It is because of this fear, many girls even the members of the Red Club feel terrified to offer their open support to Riley.

Newmann also theorizes the same. A person will try to voice out their opinion out in the open. But when he/she realizes that they do not share the opinion of the majority, they are gripped with a fear of isolation. This makes them to go back on their stance. They want to feel included in the majority group and hence go against their very belief just because they want to be a part of majority in general. Hence their real voices are silenced and they are made to accept the views which they opposed in the very first place. As Hamid calls it, the girls



undergo the process of spiralling because their views and voices are not heard and they are silenced. But ultimately they find their voice.

Long back mainstream culture also try to silence women when it comes to the talk related to their bodies; especially sexual preferences, menstruation, pregnancy and importantly about the autonomy a girl/woman has in these things. Blood from other parts of the body is not regarded disgusting but blood from vagina is thought so. With the coming of feminism and most importantly second wave of feminism, personal became political. Slowly the situation changed and now it is only progressive. Post Covid, technology is the one and only thing that connects people. People find it easy to protest online than offline; and it also has a greater impact. One tweet or post from one corner of the world creates waves in another unrelated area. Discussions about menstruation, pregnancy, body shaming, sexual orientation are now becoming very common. Videos are surfacing where boys experience or try to experience menstrual cramps like girls. This seems to be improving the understanding of the pain and trauma undergone by women in general. This shows that no matter how much one tries to silence this topic, it surfaces because of its universality. There cannot be possible spiraling done in this regard.

Media also contributes much to this development. Janie Hampton's 2017 article "The Taboo of Menstruation" talks about the different baseless beliefs surrounding the concept of menstruation. *Turning Red* (2022) movie talks about the theme of menstruation in detail – the changes undergone by a girl when she becomes a woman, as if that is the only yardstick to determine her character. There is an increased awareness about menstrual hygiene; for instance Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) strives to create as much awareness as possible to the girls regarding menstruation.

First period of a girl is only a starting point of what is to come – intercourse, pregnancy, pre-menstrual stage, post-menstrual stage, and menopause and so on. All these need to be addressed to provide the girls with a clear understanding of what is about to happen to their bodies. With the changed lifestyle girls have problems in their periods and hormones too leading to severe complications. All these issues are to be addressed in detail and women have to come forward to support each other in this regard – irrespective of race, colour, language and status.

Regulation of the female body seems to be the priority of our society. "Throughout history, the experiences of female anatomy generally were not recognized and articulated by the subjects who experienced them first hand. Men described women; permitting and acknowledging only certain versions of experience, while denying the emergence of unexpected truths" (Hatch 88). Foundational philosophers and theorists also viewed Menstruation as something to be discussed privately. Freud had paved way for this with his theories of penis envy, castration complex, Elektra complex. Each woman is different and the context of her life is different. Hence menstruation cannot be generalized too despite it being a universal experience. Nowadays, many corporate companies are permitting women to take menstrual leave. Many provisions are being made by many governments to make sure that the menstrual needs and menstrual hygiene of its women are met. Times are changing and it is no use to push them towards the age old spiral of silence.



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