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VOL. 41 SYMPOSIUM ESSAY: UNCLEAN

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The following is a part of an essay series for the Volume 41 Symposium, "Are You There Law? It's Me, Menstruation."

Growing up in urban Sri Lanka, a girl's first period was considered a celebration, feted publicly in a grandiose fashion often symbolizing the family's social status. As a private person, the idea of publicizing this very private affair was uncomfortable and embarrassing. What was more startling was the huge lifestyle and societal changes that were now a part of my life. I was now told to limit my seating, interactions with people, and even clothing because I was considered 'unclean'. This concept perplexed me because for the first three days of my period, I was considered 'dirty'. If I sat on the sofa, my mum would follow behind with a wet cloth to wipe the non-existent 'dirt' away. I was not allowed to touch my own clothes, and if I accidentally made contact with anything around the house, my mum would wipe it down until on the third day I took a shower and 'washed away' the dirt. I couldn't understand this "uncleanliness" that my mother spoke of. As a practicing Hindu, perhaps more perplexing was my banishment from going to the temple. If menstruation was natural then why was I prohibited from a place of worship and unable to honor the goddesses that supposedly created me?

It's been 6 years since I left home and almost a decade since my first period, and yet - despite the education and social mobility that I have attained - I find myself in a cultural conundrum. Every month on the third day of my period, like clockwork, I take a shower, strip my bed and wipe the entire house down. Logically, I know it's a flawed ritual built on centuries of misogyny and patriarchal ideology, yet I continue to struggle internally to break free of the grip that these taboos hold on me. I find that these rituals give me a foothold into my cultural identity. Subconsciously, I think I fear letting go of these rituals. I'm afraid that letting go would be synonymous with letting go of my identity as a Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu woman in my current, ever-changing environment. As an immigrant to the U.S., stability is a treacherous fiend that you constantly seek. Yet, as your accent slips away, and you get used to doing things differently, you question whether you're losing a little bit of your roots at the same time. My monthly period gives me a semblance of normalcy. Paradoxically, despite the pain and discomfort, I find comfort in the routine of having my period, and the long, drawn-out process of cleaning myself and my home. This ritual helps me feel more grounded, it reinforces that despite perpetual change, I am still the same woman I've always been. Regardless of the tensions of going through this patriarchal cleansing ritual and the huge amount of effort it entails, if I choose to ignore it, I am left with a sense of deep discomfort. I continue to learn and unpack these tensions, and hope to one day see

my period as natural and not 'unclean'.

Keywords: law; gender; menstruation; International Law; symposia; Are You There Law? It's Me Menstruation