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“Am I a woman now?": Exploring EAL Classroom Potential of *The Moon Within* in Relation to Gender and the Bleeding Body

Master's thesis in Primary and Lower Secondary Teacher Education for Years 1-7

Supervisor: Alyssa Magee Lowery

Co-supervisor: Jade Dillon Craig

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore how the 2019 middle-grade novel *The Moon Within* by Aida Salazar can be used in Norwegian schools' English Additional Language (EAL) classrooms to teach students about the topics of gender identity, menstruation, and menstrual shame. Using critical content analysis alongside theories on gender identity and performativity, I aim to highlight the disconnect between the Norwegian curriculum and topics like menstruation and gender. The sometimes vague formulations of the Norwegian curriculum leave a lot of room for teachers to use tools, literature and methods that they find the most useful, without setting limitations. This also leaves room to leave out certain topics from teaching, like for example gender identity and menstruation. In this thesis, the relevance of these topics to the curriculum is explored, especially in relation to health and life skills. I aim to advocate for certain topics to be explicitly mentioned in the curriculum, and to show how literature, more specifically *The Moon Within*, can be used in the Norwegian EAL classroom to teach them.

Key terms: Menstruation; Gender Studies; Gender Performativity; Shame; Gender Identity; EAL Classroom; Critical Content Analysis

Sammendrag

Denne masteroppgavens mål er å undersøke hvordan *The Moon Within* av Aida Salazar, en roman for mellomtrinnet fra 2019, kan brukes i Norske skolars klasserom med engelsk som tilleggsspråk (EAL), for å lære elever om tema som kjønnsidentitet, menstruasjon, og skam rundt mensen. Ved bruk av kritisk innholdsanalyse i samspill med teorier rundt kjønnsidentitet og -performativitet, ønsker jeg å påpeke den norske læreplanens mangler i forhold til menstruasjon og kjønn. Læreplanens vage formuleringer etterlater mye rom for lærere med tanke på bruk av verktøy, litteratur og metoder som de anser som nyttige, uten å definere for strenge rammer. Dette etterlater også rom for å unngå enkelte tema i opplæringen, som for eksempel kjønnsidentitet og menstruasjon. I denne masteroppgaven undersøkes disse temaene sin relevans til læreplanen, spesielt i forhold til folkehelse og livsmestring. Jeg ønsker å foreslå at enkelte tema skal bli eksplisitt nevnt i læreplanen, og å vise hvordan litteratur, mer spesifikt *The Moon Within*, kan brukes i norske engelskklasserom for å ta dem opp.

Nøkkelord: Menstruasjon; Kjønnforskning; Kjønnperformativitet; Skam; Kjønnidentitet; EAL-klasserom; Kritisk innholdsanalyse

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Writing a master's thesis is something I dreamed of as a child, and now I have done it. It would not have been possible for me to do it without wonderful supervisors, friends and family. Being able to write my thesis in my childhood favorite subject, and about literature, to fulfill another childhood dream, becoming a teacher, is something I will cherish forever.

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Table of Contents

1	Introduction	10
1.1	Motivation and Positionality	11
2	Theoretical Framework	15
2.1	Biological Sex, Gender Identity, and Gender Performance, and the Limitations of the Gender Binary	15
2.1.1	Gender and Biological Sex.....	16
2.1.2	The Gender Binary and Its Limitations	16
2.1.3	Gender Identity and Gender Performance	17
2.2	Menstruation	19
2.2.1	Menstruation Myths, Misinformation and Shame, and the Repercussions.....	20
2.3	The Norwegian Curriculum	23
3	Methodology and Choice of Primary Text.....	26
3.1	Choice of Primary Text.....	27
3.1.1	Novel-in-verse.....	28
3.1.2	<i>The Moon Within (2019)</i>	29
3.2	Critical Content Analysis.....	30
3.3	Limitations and Ethical Considerations	32
4	Analysis.....	35
4.1	Gender Identity in <i>The Moon Within</i>	35
4.2	Menstrual Shame and the Mystification of the Female Body in <i>The Moon Within</i> 37	
5	Discussion.....	43
6	Conclusion and Further Research	47
	Bibliography	50

1 Introduction

Children's literature portraying feminist and queer issues can be used as a tool to encourage productive discussions in the English Additional Language (EAL) classroom in order to de-stigmatize them and to promote inclusivity and diversity in a modern society. I have decided to use one example of a children's novel to support this statement, and the novel I have chosen is *The Moon Within*, a middle-grade novel-in-verse from 2019 written by Mexico-born author Aida Salazar. This novel was chosen because it features gender identity and shame in relation to menstruation. My research questions are "How does *The Moon Within* provide space for discussions on menstruation and gender?" and "How can shame surrounding puberty be combatted in the EAL classroom by the use of *The Moon Within*?", and these have been used to guide me in my discussion. For my analysis, I investigated how menstrual shame, disgust and mystification, and gender identity are shown in the novel.

The main character of the novel asks herself the question "Am I a woman now?" (Salazar, 2019, p. 176) when she first gets her period. The reason I decided to use this quote as part of my thesis title is that it encapsulates one of the aspects that can lead to anxiety surrounding menstruation, and it also brings in the topic of gender. Not all those who menstruate are women, but menstruation is still often seen as a thing that only women go through (Kosher et al., 2023), and that all women go through, even though this is not the case. Menstruation starting can pose the question for all menstruating bodies of whether they are a woman from then on.

This novel is multi-faceted and explores many topics that could be discussed in the classroom, but for this thesis, my focus is on the opportunities it offers regarding discussions on menstruation in relation to gender identity and shame. The thesis argues for the use of literature, more specifically the middle-grade novel *The Moon Within*, in the Norwegian EAL classroom through the lens of the LK20 competence aims. Both subject-specific competence aims, and those related to the core curriculum are relevant to the use of literature to discuss social justice issues in the classroom. English is one of the subjects that allow for, and encourage the use of authentic texts, and therefore offers a unique opportunity to start conversations and discussions on difficult topics. It is possible to explore these topics in other subjects as well, for example, in the Norwegian subject, and the intention of this thesis is not to discourage this. However, there is more secondary literature and more available information and literature in English than in Norwegian. Therefore, developing a vocabulary in both languages on these topics is crucial in providing students with the necessary tools to gain sufficient correct information on topics such as gender identity, menstruation, and menstrual shame. *The Moon Within's* novel-in-verse structure is discussed as a potential tool to make this novel a productive choice for EAL classroom discussions.

In this thesis, a critical content analysis of *The Moon Within* was conducted, with a focus on feminist and queer issues, more specifically menstrual shame, the mystification of the female body, and gender identity. Within these, topics such as queer menstruation, transgender experiences, the gender binary, and stigma are also discussed. My motivation for writing this thesis and my positionality are first presented, before the

theoretical framework used to analyze the primary text is introduced. In the section on theoretical framework, some of the Norwegian curriculum's competence aims relevant to the thesis are presented, and this is also where some of the disconnect between the themes of my thesis and the Norwegian curriculum is pointed out. Further, the methodology of the analysis is explained as well as a short note on how the primary text was chosen, and the reader is provided with an introduction to the primary text's contents. Here, some limitations and ethical considerations relevant to the thesis are also discussed. The analysis then follows before a discussion that leads to the conclusion of the thesis. In the conclusion, some ideas for further research are also included.

1.1 Motivation and Positionality

My reason for writing my thesis on these topics is mostly built on personal experiences, as well as the experiences of some of the people in my life who are important to me. The relevance to the classroom has become evident when remembering my own school experience, when teaching students now as an adult, and when reading articles about and hearing other people's experiences.

On the topic of gender identity, it is worth noting that I am a cis-gendered woman. I have experiences of being considered "not feminine enough" by some, usually by men when I do not give them the attention and validation that they may be seeking, or when they may feel like I am behaving in a more stereotypically masculine way than they are. At some points in my adolescence, this did bother me a bit because I never felt like I was not a girl. My femininity was only questioned by others because of my interests, voice, and way of speaking. It was never questioned by me. At other times, I was proud to be considered a "tomboy" or even felt like I was not masculine enough. My relationship with gender expression was complicated, and I did not know much about gender other than the stereotypes of the gender binary as a young child. As an adult, I have embraced the aspects of my personality that are culturally considered masculine as a valuable addition to those that are considered feminine, and I am very comfortable in my gender identity as I am still exploring ways to express myself to find out what works best for me. I suggest that gender is a spectrum and that we all have the capacity to perform gender irrespective of our biology or assigned sex at birth.

Despite my rather tame gender identity journey, I do have people in my life who have had more complex journeys, and some who are still trying to figure out where on the spectrum of gender they feel the most at home. Several of these people, whether they are now at peace with their gender identity or they are still experiencing some gender dysphoria or uncertainty, have mentioned that not learning about this at an earlier age has led to some discomfort, and in some cases even trauma. This trauma could have been either avoided or at least made easier to work through if they had not had to experience the feeling of being othered or that there was something wrong with them. Although representation of different gender identities can be seen in both social media posts and in traditional media, it is still not very common, and it was even less common when my friends and I grew up. The lack of representation did not help any of them to feel like they were normal or that their gender identity was valid.

When it comes to menstruation, this is something that both I and many people in my life experience have experienced or will experience. Although a large number of the population will menstruate at some point in their lives, not all have a very positive

experience learning about this in school. Some may not have learned about it at all. Some of the people I know have had issues surrounding menstruation, and not all of them have known that something was wrong. There are also some who have known something was wrong without knowing what exactly, and some have experienced a lot of anxiety related to these issues. Had they known more about what a healthy menstrual experience is, and what some of the signs are that there might be something wrong, they could have had fewer negative experiences related to menstruating.

My class was not taught about menstruation until tenth grade. At that point, most of us were fifteen years old, and most of those who would ever have first-hand experience with menstruation already had. It was briefly mentioned that menstruation is something that women go through, and that it happens when an egg is left unfertilized. Luckily, I had learned quite a bit about puberty and the body in general earlier, as I have had access to and the opportunity to read books about the topic. My parents taught me how to read, as well as the joy and use of reading early, and I was also given a book directed towards children to learn about the body. Some of the things explained and illustrated in this book were how babies are made, the digestion process, and how different parts of the human body work. I was never discouraged from seeking new knowledge either, and any questions I would ask were answered. This led to me being lucky enough to understand a lot of the things happening to me as I went through puberty, and especially my mother made sure I knew about a lot of the things that would happen ahead of time. Through media, listening to other people's stories of sexual education, and first-hand observations in teaching practice and work as a substitute teacher, I have become convinced that sexual education offered in Norwegian schools is not sufficient. For example, a lot of schools divide the students into two groups when teaching them about the body, and usually, the "boy groups" are taught different things from what the "girl groups" are taught. This leads to a knowledge gap for students, shown by the fact that some males do not have basic knowledge about things that happen to and with the female body, like menstruation (Torjusen & Eckhoff, 2016).

Of course, I was not prepared for every single aspect of puberty, as there are so many different possible experiences of puberty, but I was a lot better prepared than I would have been if I had not been raised the way I was. This is one of the things I believe my parents did well. I later realized that I was very lucky in this regard and that not all people are. If I had not been raised the way I was, and I had not had access to the information that I did, I imagine my experience of going through puberty would have been very different. A traumatic first menstrual experience is more likely if the person is not informed and mentally prepared enough (Amann-Gainotti, 1986), as many possible unpleasant surprises can occur. Despite being relatively well prepared for some of the bodily changes that I would experience, that does not mean that there has been no attempt at hiding menstruation or other aspects of puberty throughout adolescence or early adulthood. Several researchers have collected data about social customs around menstruation, including Newton (2016), Zivi (2020), and Moffat and Pickering (2019). Their research shows that it is not uncommon even for adults to hide the fact that they are menstruating, or to cringe at the idea of other people, especially men, seeing them bring a tampon or a menstrual pad to the restroom.

Academically, my motivation for writing my thesis on menstruation in relation to shame and gender is that the use of children's literature to explore topics of menstruation, shame, and gender identity in the classroom is not a widely researched topic. Also, with the curriculum leaving so much space to avoid these topics if one wishes to, this thesis is

also an argument to specify in the curriculum that students in Norway should learn about them. As the polarizing topic of gender identity becomes more popular in public discourse, productive classroom discussions about gender and shame are essential to creating a society that is not divided by misconceptions and a lack of information (Kosciw et al., 2015). Lawmakers all over the world are demanding control over female bodies (Chesney-Lind & Hadi, 2017), and the female body is generally more policed than the male body. Examples are restrictions on how much, and which parts, of the female body are allowed to be shown in public and online, abortion laws, and the reluctance from physicians to perform female sterilization versus male sterilization, especially on childless individuals (Buturovic, 2022). This makes being well-informed crucial to the present and the future adults of the world. This does, however, require the teachers teaching these future adults to be informed too, and to teach these topics in an informative, interesting, and helpful way to their students. Using literature as a tool can be very useful in this, as it introduces social justice issues in a way that can be more engaging to students than introducing the topics with non-fictional texts (Wallin, 2023). That is why I decided to research this for my master's thesis. Literature has played a big part in my life, and the lives of several of my friends, and continues to prove useful in teaching different topics, so why not the ones discussed in this thesis?

To make a topic easier to find information relevant to oneself on, the topic needs to not be too taboo to be spoken freely about in productive ways. Through experience, it has become clear to me that one can often witness snarky remarks joking about how someone being in a bad mood being on their period. This has also been shown in research. For example, in "Tackling Taboo Topics: A Review of the Three Ms in Working Women's Lives" (2020), Grandey et al. note the prevalence of snarky remarks attributing negative affect to menstruation. Productive conversations and discussions on menstrual health have been observed to be a lot rarer to come by (Chrisler, 2007), at least as openly and loudly as these misogynistic comments (Chrisler, 2013). This also goes for conversations on the topic of gender identity. Purposefully misgendering people is used to insult both cis- and non-cis-gendered people. Trans and non-binary people's gender identities are not recognized (Edmonds & Pino, 2023; Worthen, 2021), and cis-gendered people may be misgendered in a joking manner to insult them for not fitting into the molds society has made for them in terms of being feminine or masculine enough to be a valid member of whichever gender they are.

The topics of menstruation and gender identity are also very polarizing. Talking about menstruation openly and in a productive manner or not accepting misogynistic jokes about menstruation can lead to discrimination as well as accusations of pushing an inappropriate political agenda, especially if the conversations take place around children. Some politicians deem it so inappropriate to speak to young children about menstruation that they even suggest laws to stop this from happening (Friedman, 2023), and some of them even take effect. The same goes for the topic of gender identity, but this topic can be met with even more hostility, as talk about menstruation may lead more to mockery (Chrisler, 2013) and such, but talk of gender identity can lead to harassment of a different sort; violence (Butler, 2004), threats, accusations of having ill intentions towards others but especially towards children, and more (Lombardi et al., 2001; Walker, 2023). The misconceptions of gender queerness or reproductive health being spoken about in the presence of children being harmful are shown in the banning of queer books and books with content related to reproductive health, which ultimately hurts children (Perfas, 2023). Discrimination, violence, and mental health challenges experienced by queer individuals in Norway, and the negative attitudes towards them (Anderssen et al.,

2021; Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2023) prove that gender needs to be discussed in the classroom in a way that promotes inclusivity and acceptance. Literature on the subject is mainly sought out by those who are gender queer, or people who are already allies (Butler, 2020). This means that students that are already accepting can build on their allyship, and the ones who are opposed stay that way. When teachers incorporate these topics in the classroom, this allows all students to encounter new perspectives and develop an understanding of other people's emotions and experiences.

Both being a menstruating person and being a person who is not cis-gendered are aspects of one's life that can lead to lower social status as well as a direct threat to one's health and well-being (Miao, 2022), especially if a person belongs to both of these groups. Judith Butler acknowledges in *Undoing Gender* (2004) that intersectionality affects the likelihood of being a victim of discrimination, meaning that being for example both transgender and a menstruating individual will make someone more susceptible to violence and discrimination than a person who belongs to only one of these groups. This thesis aims to be a part of making these topics less taboo by using literature to introduce them early in schools. I hope that this type of research will, through removing stigma, ultimately lead to fewer issues related to menstruation physically, emotionally, and socially. The goal is to promote menstrual neutrality, a perspective on menstruation as something that simply *is*, rather than being something positive or negative.

2 Theoretical Framework

For this section of the thesis, the theoretical framework used to analyze the primary text is introduced. This theoretical framework is centered around menstruation, menstrual shame, and gender studies. The first part of the theoretical framework focuses on gender. Namely, the difference between biological sex and gender is explained, before the concepts of gender identity, gender performance, and the gender binary and its limitations are introduced. The theoretical framework surrounding gender identity and gender performance is heavily supported using works by Judith Butler. The second part of the theoretical framework focuses on menstruation, where the focus is on menstrual shame, menstruation for trans and non-binary people, and some of the misconceptions of menstruation and the repercussions of these. The third part of the theoretical framework section focuses on menstruation and gender identity in the Norwegian curriculum, and the lack of attention to these aspects of a person's health given by The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. Regarding the curriculum, the competence aims discussed are ones for seventh grade, as I am in the MGLU 1-7 program, meaning I will be teaching in primary schools. The thesis is still relevant for those who teach older students, as it can give an idea of what the students are supposed to already be aware of from primary school, at least according to the curriculum.

This theoretical framework is meant to support the analysis and claims made later in the thesis, as well as provide important information for the reader. Furthermore, my application of these theories supports the notion of menstruation and gender identity deserving more attention in the curriculum. The theoretical framework is also meant to help the reader understand the conclusions drawn in the analysis and discussion of the thesis.

2.1 Biological Sex, Gender Identity, and Gender Performance, and the Limitations of the Gender Binary

Gender is something one identifies as, and it is not determined by which reproductive organs one is born with (Butler, 2006). Therefore, assigning genders to people based on this, or based on presumptions due to appearance, interests, or career, can be harmful. Although many people are comfortable with their assigned gender, and the potential expectations that follow, this is not the case for everyone. Career-wise, it can severely limit people from doing what they want to do, what they could potentially do well at. It can also endanger people, especially if they do not conform to what is expected of them based on their assigned gender. Gender is a central part of a person's identity, and within gender there are, according to feminist and queer theorists, two aspects; gender identity and gender performance (Butler, 2006). These are presented in this theory section, as well as a brief description of the difference between biological sex and gender. The gender binary and some of its limitations will be explored as well, as it is relevant to the well-being and opportunities of all people, regardless of how well or how poorly they may fit into the molds that society has decided they should fit into. Not only is it relevant

to the well-being of people emotionally, but it also affects which opportunities people are given, and the ones they dare to take.

2.1.1 Gender and Biological Sex

Because we currently cannot change our chromosome combination, sex is, unlike gender, fixed. Biological sex, or assumed biological sex, is often used to, sometimes inaccurately assign people a gender. This happens despite gender not being fixed like sex is, and despite gender not being a result of biological sex or assumed biological sex (Butler, 2006). One's biological sex, and the assumptions made about one based on this, can determine how one is raised due to societal and cultural expectations, and this can set limitations in which opportunities people of certain biological sexes are given. Whereas biological sex is based on the combination of chromosomes in one's body (Regitz-Zagrosek, 2012), gender is a social construct. This means that gender is not something determined by nature or that can be assigned based on biological traits, but it is socially constructed by the society in which a person exists. For example, not all cultures have had - or have - the gender binary telling them there are two genders, and that they are determined by a person's biological sex (Sinha, 2012), but modern Western society has decided to simplify the fluidity of gender to a binary. This is evident in my focal text, *The Moon Within*, where indigenous Mexican culture is represented. While Marco's gender fluidity as a *xochihuah* is often celebrated within his close cultural group, the Western culture's gender binary shapes the perspectives of various characters in their daily lived realities. This ultimately does not provide a lot of space for those who do not follow the norms assigned to these genders, those who are neither male nor female biologically, or those whose gender is non-congruent to the one their society assigns them based on biological sex.

Although gender and sex are two different aspects of a person, the terms are sometimes inaccurately used interchangeably (Diamond, 2002). It is often assumed, due to the inaccurate assumption that there are only two biological sexes in humans, that there are also only two genders. This is at least the common conception in Western societies and societies heavily influenced by the West (Morgenroth & Ryan, 2021). These two genders are "man" and "woman". "Man" is considered the "masculine" gender, and "woman" is considered the "feminine" gender. People who are assigned the gender "woman" are often those who have XX chromosomes, the combination of the female sex, and "men" are those who have the male combination, XY (Regitz-Zagrosek, 2012). However, as previously mentioned, humans have more sexes than just these two, people who have other chromosome combinations than XX or XY. For these individuals, the umbrella term "intersex" is often used (Rebić et al., 2023). Some of the possible intersex chromosome combinations are XXY, XXX, and XYY (Benestad & Grasmø, 2023), but there are also other possible combinations.

2.1.2 The Gender Binary and Its Limitations

The gender binary refers to the common presumption that there are two genders, often assigned based on sex. It does not consider the existence of intersex people when assigning the genders "man" or "woman" based on whether they have XX or XY chromosome combinations. The gender binary therefore sets limitations already from the

moment a human's sex is determined. If they have, for example, the combination XXY, they will, in most cases, be considered either a "man" or a "woman" based on whether their function most resembles those with XX or those with XY, even though they have a different chromosome combination than the sexes usually associated with these genders. In addition to this deficiency, the gender binary does not provide proficient vocabulary or perspectives to accurately address non-binary people or those who otherwise do not identify with the gender assigned at birth based on their biological sex (Butler, 2004).

Further, the gender binary is heavily linked to certain traits, interests, skills, and the labeling of being either "feminine" or "masculine". This can lead to people being assigned genders that are not necessarily correct (Freeman & Knowles, 2012), often based on their biological sex, or assumed biological sex. Also, it can lead to people not being considered "man enough" or "woman enough" if they are deemed more or less masculine or feminine than what people consider "appropriate" for their assigned gender. This sets limitations on people's lives, potentially causing them to not be able to fulfill their potential or to even live less safely (The Fawcett Society, 2020). Not only does it cause issues for those not fitting the boxes made for people of their assigned gender, but it also causes issues for transitioning transgender and non-binary people. Those who "pass" as a different gender than what they identify as are often misgendered (Berberick, 2018). This means that if one does not fit the heteronormative image of what is the "correct" way to be a certain gender, one does not "pass", which often leads to alienation, discrimination, and discomfort.

In my opinion, the gender binary facilitates the possibility of misgendering people, both intentionally and unintentionally. The gender binary, like any other hegemonic structure, allows for the existence of stigmatization. This is because stigmatization happens when someone goes against the norms of a society, and this gets a reaction from those who do follow the norms in question (Goffman, 1968). The widespread idea of there being two genders, the gender binary, creates an extra arena for discrediting people's gender experience, as cultures can share an idea of certain traits, interests, or hobbies being "masculine" or "feminine". This leads to people potentially being described as a gender that they do not identify with. In turn, this can cause people to either be unable to live a fulfilling life due to restrictions or to feel too self-conscious about living their lives the way they wish to (The Fawcett Society, 2020). It is also not uncommon for it to be pointed out when people work in professions that are often assigned to a specific gender, and the person working in that profession being, or is presumed, a different gender; for example, "male nurses", "male teachers", "female engineer", "midwives" and "female electricians". Research has also shown that the gendering of professions does affect people's decisions in which career paths they choose to follow, although there are still people who make less traditional choices (Han et al., 2020a).

2.1.3 Gender Identity and Gender Performance

According to Judith Butler (2004), gender is something one does, and that is done in the presence of others. Gender as a social and cultural construct must happen in interaction with others. Alone, gender performance is not present as one is alone; one is not perceived, and therefore not performing. It is one's social performance that creates the "reality" of gender (Butler, 2006). This means that, according to theory on gender as a performance, what one does and what one shows the world is a manifestation of one's

gender. Of course, this would entail that one is free to express one's gender and one's identity freely and safely. This is unfortunately not the reality for all people, regarding norms and expectations, and laws, as there are areas of the world where not all gender identities and sexualities are allowed. Even in areas where being queer is not prohibited, there are still individuals who fight against queer people's rights to express themselves authentically and safely. Limited opportunities of gender expression or gender performance can therefore lead to distress as one of the aspects of a person's gender is not allowed to safely exist authentically.

Biological sex can also potentially limit a person's opportunities regarding gender performance as there are physical traits that are often typical for one biological sex that often is culturally considered to also indicate someone's gender. This means that people can "assign" genders to others based on social and cultural conceptions of what is deemed feminine, masculine, or other descriptions linked to gender. The gender assigned is usually one of two, due to the gender binary, which is a deterministic concept. These assigned genders can be non-congruent with the gender one identifies as (Rahilly, 2015). For the sake of this thesis, involuntary bodily functions such as menstruation will be considered "behavior". This is simply because although menstruating is not something one actively chooses to do, although there are ways to stop menstruating either temporarily or permanently, it is still something one does that is culturally linked to gender. Menstruation can therefore be experienced as being betrayed by one's body, both for those who menstruate and do not feel like this is congruent with their gender and for those who feel like menstruation is something missing for them to feel like they are sufficiently fitting into the gender they identify with (Kosher et al., 2023).

In *The Moon Within*, menstruation is also celebrated in the presence of others, meaning it becomes less private than it in some cases can be. Because menstruation is made to not be private in *The Moon Within*, it can be considered a behavior in this novel. Gender performativity, and both voluntary and involuntary "behavior" is something one can discuss at length in the classroom, as the norms for what gender is change over time. Multiple factors decide how they change (Hoskin, 2020), and students must be aware of this. This awareness will not only have the potential to help them feel like they can express themselves but can also expand their understanding of other cultures, religions, and societies. The Norwegian curriculum stresses the importance of this, although not explicitly linked to the topics discussed in this thesis (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020).

Gender identity is about what gender one identifies with internally and is often what one wishes to express - to "perform". One's gender identity is how one understands oneself in relation to cultural and social definitions of the recognized genders (Wood & Eagly, 2015). In modern Western societies, this mostly focuses on traits and aspects of men and women, and the gender roles often assigned to these sexes. It also focuses on the personality traits stereotypically associated with the different genders (Wood & Eagly, 2015). Gender identity does not necessarily match the gender one is assigned by others but is important to recognize and accept so that people can flourish in different aspects of their lives.

Trans people have historically suffered due to their gender identity and its non-congruent relationship to their biological sex (Pearce et al., 2020; The Fawcett Society, 2020). Not because there is something foundationally wrong with for example one's gender being woman and one being of the male sex, but because of society's view on gender and sex,

and how these should be congruent with the perceptions of what is “appropriate” or “correct” and what is not. Gender has overall played a central role in discrimination throughout history, especially against those who are not cis-gendered heterosexual men who are perceived as being cis-gendered heterosexual men (Butler, 2011).

Classroom discussions on the topics of gender and gender identity are important, as one never knows which students may have questions about their own gender identity and how they are “allowed” or “supposed” to express themselves. There can also be students in the classroom who may have other people in their lives with a gender identity that is non-congruent to the gender they are assigned by others based on appearance, biological sex, or other factors. Recognizing someone’s entire identity is crucial for them to feel safe, and to be able to live up to their potential, in all aspects of life (Hoskin, 2020; Krulatz & Christison, 2023). The discrediting of someone’s gender identity can lead to isolation (Hoskin, 2020), which can lead to severe mental health issues.

Discussions on gender and similar topics therefore have a place in the classroom and using literature to start these conversations and discussions can be a useful tool to get students who do not experience issues related to society’s view on their gender to empathize or sympathize with fictional characters who do. Teaching tolerance, the benefits of diversity, and how the world treats other people is part of what students are supposed to learn in Norwegian schools, and this includes understanding, or at least accepting, people with a different experience than one’s own. The English subject offers unique opportunities for teaching gender, gender identity, and gender performance. Not only does the English language provide terminology that sets gender and biological sex apart, which the Norwegian word “kjønn” does not, but there is also more available literature on these topics in English. This means that it can be easier for students to express themselves and their opinions in discussions on gender, and to find information on it, in English.

2.2 Menstruation

Menstruation is a physical phenomenon that happens to most, but not all, female humans. The process is part of the cycle that allows humans to reproduce without necessarily involving doctors or other medical professionals. The first menstruation of a human starts, if it starts, when the individual is in puberty. It could be one of the first signs of puberty, but it does not have to be. The menstruation cycle typically involves bleeding for a certain number of days, often a bit less than a week, after ovulating, and then not bleeding for about three weeks before the next menstruation. This cycle continues until menopause, unless interrupted or terminated by for example health issues, hormonal treatment or imbalance, medical procedures, nutrition, or other factors that could lead to the voluntary or involuntary loss of menstruation (Vickers et al., 2018).

Although menstruation is a physical phenomenon, it can affect the emotional health of the person experiencing it, especially during certain periods of the cycle. It can also indirectly affect the person’s social life, as the physical or psychological effects can influence one’s behavior, energy levels, patience, social needs, and more (Chrisler, 2013). Menstruation can also influence parts of the body that may not directly be linked to the person’s reproductive system, for example by changing sleep patterns and the need for rest, muscle strength, bodily aches, digestion, and more (Sharma et al., 2008).

The stigma and misconceptions surrounding menstruation can also impact menstruating people's access to water, housing, education, and religious expression (United Nations, 2019). It is therefore a major part of the physical health of menstruating people. The psychological effects are also vast, vary from person to person, and even from cycle to cycle, and depend on different factors, for example, weight (Kim et al., 2022). It is therefore fair to say that sufficient information is crucial, both for those who experience it themselves, and for those who do not, in order to understand others.

2.2.1 Menstruation Myths, Misinformation and Shame, and the Repercussions

Menstruation-related shame is not a foreign concept in today's modern society. Menstruating bodies from all over the world have experienced feelings of shame related to the physical phenomenon that is crucial to the continuation of our species (Betsu et al., 2023; Eyring et al., 2023; Hawkey et al., 2017), which creates several challenges for menstruating people. The misinformation one may meet can also lead to devastating fates for menstruating bodies, either because of their ignorance on certain areas of the topic, or because of other people's view on what menstruation is, what it does, and how it affects the person experiencing it (Seear, 2009). One of the reasons one may be misinformed or otherwise ill-informed about menstruation is that the topic is quite taboo, and not as researched as a lot of other physical processes that happen within the body. The main source for information on menstruation for many adolescents is their mothers. Unfortunately, these mothers may possess the incorrect information, or instill menstrual shame in their children like it was instilled in them (Betsu et al., 2023), intentionally or unintentionally. There are also many myths and misconceptions surrounding menstruation that ultimately lead to more possibilities for misinformation. Menstrual health needs to not only be researched further, but it also needs to be a topic met with more openness. This can make it easier for people to find and check information on menstruation, and less intimidating to ask questions. It will also lead to more initial knowledge on the topic.

The stigmatization of menstruating bodies is one of the reasons why certain issues like endometriosis are often diagnosed late, and psychological issues like shame-induced anxiety are present (Seear, 2009). It also contributes to making the female sex seem inferior to the male sex (Eyring et al., 2023), as the male sex cannot menstruate, and most of those who are female will, at some point in life, menstruate. The fear of humiliation or being othered for menstruating can lead to silence rather than information about the topic, and is not only a result of potential misinformation but can even contribute to more misinformation (Eyring et al., 2023). The sense of menstruating bodies being inferior, and "dirty" (Riad & Forden, 2021) or "impure" (Dey et al., 2024) is also often related to hostile sexism (Chrisler et al., 2014; Forbes et al., 2003). In some religions, menstrual blood is considered contaminating and so dirty that others are not to touch menstruating people, and there are rituals for the time after menstruation to "clean" the person whose menstruation has just ended (Dunnavant & Roberts, 2013). In some religions, menstruating bodies are also not allowed to enter religious buildings, interact with sacred texts, or even pray or fast during menstruation (Guterman et al., 2008). This view of menstruation and the restriction of menstruating bodies makes the stigma surrounding menstruation a hazard to those who are female, and those who present themselves as women without necessarily being female, as it may be assumed

that they menstruate as well. It also indirectly compares menstruation to disease or infection, as humans tend to avoid things that disgust them and perform hygiene rituals if having come in contact with something dirty, as to prevent contracting disease or infection (Curtis, 2007). Menstruation is not a disease or infection, and one cannot contract menstruation from contact with a menstruating person. Yet, menstruating people can experience being perceived as “contaminating” because of the hostile attitudes toward menstrual blood, and therefore alienated and excluded from areas or activities where they may encounter other people. This is reminiscent of the stigmatization surrounding for example HIV, AIDS and leprosy, where people would, and sometimes still will, avoid people with these diagnoses in order to prevent it spreading to themselves (Stangl et al., 2019).

Menstrual hygiene is also relevant, as the availability of products and information on menstrual hygiene will influence its impact on a person’s life. For example, menstruation products are, in most countries, not free of cost, making it necessary to have the financial means to prevent clothes and furniture from being stained with menstrual blood. This means that to avoid period-stained clothes and furniture, one needs to spend money, meaning that menstruating bodies, have an expense that non-menstruating people do not have, putting non-menstruating people in a better financial position (Crawford & Waldman, 2018).

The topic of period stains leads back to shame, as period stains are often deemed “dirty” and something that should be avoided because one should be ashamed of it (Ramos, 2022). The impression of menstruation being “disgusting” is also shown in how people react to seeing someone carrying, or dropping menstrual hygiene products (Roberts et al., 2002), as it reminds them of the existence of menstruation. The same study that showed these results also showed that people are more inclined to sexualize the body of the person whose menstruation they have been reminded of. Meaning that not only can menstruation cause people to be alienated in social situations, but it can also cause them to get unwanted sexual attention as well. This is especially problematic when the menstruating body belongs to a child, as a presumed link between menstruation and sex can then be attempted to justify inappropriate and harmful ways of viewing menstruating children. Hiding signs of one’s menstruation can therefore be a defense mechanism used to avoid this unwanted sexualization of one’s body.

The female sex and the functions the female body can possess, like menstruation, are often linked to several aspects of nature (McCrickard, 1991). One of the most prevalent figures of nature being linked to the female body is the moon. The moon has especially been linked to menstruation, and it has been believed for a long time that the lunar cycle can affect the menstrual cycle. As Salazar (2019) mentions in the interview that is part of *The Moon Within’s* paratext, several indigenous beliefs have different traditions than modern religions, for example, related to the celebration of menstruation. The celebration of menstruation can of course be empowering to some extent, but even attempts at making menstruation a positive experience can be overshadowed by the stigma (Bobel et al., 2020), at least in modern times. For those who experience menstruation as their body betraying them, it may create a cognitive disconnect to celebrate something that feels non-congruent to one’s needs and identity.

One of the possible reasons for this belief is that the length of a menstrual cycle and the length of the lunar cycle are similar; the menstrual cycle is usually 28 days long, while the lunar cycle is circa 29,5 days long (Gokhale & Kumar, 2023). The moon has also

been used to create euphemisms regarding menstruation, for example by it being referred to as someone's "moon" (Bobel et al., 2020). This is seen quite often in media, for example in *The Moon Within*, where the word "moon" is used as a euphemism for menstruation or menstrual blood several times. One way that superstitions and myths surrounding menstruation can be harmful is that they mystify the concept. Mystifying a physical process fundamental to the continuation of our species can make it seem less understandable, leading to a lack of willingness to try to understand it.

This believed connection is also seen in modern menstrual hygiene products, like the Mooncup and Lunapads, as well as some smartphone applications used for tracking one's cycle, like Luna Luna (Bobel et al., 2020; Chrisler et al., 2016; Komada et al., 2021; Stewart et al., 2010). Research from as far back as 1806 (Lemmer, 2019) shows that the menstrual cycle is independent of the lunar cycle (Murat). More recent research also supports the notion that there is no association between the lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle (Komada et al., 2021). The company Lunapads is feminism-oriented (Bobel et al., 2020), and they still have chosen a name that uses the myths of the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle having a connection to name their company. This shows that even though the mystification of this bodily function of most female bodies, some feminists see this as empowering, as it connects the female body to nature in a spiritual way. It is still worth considering how this makes people who do not menstruate but feel like they are supposed to, feel, as they do not necessarily feel like they get the same connection to the moon and the femininity related to it.

For a long time, and still to this day, menstruation has been one considered of the big indicators of femininity and womanhood (Chrisler et al., 2016; Frank, 2020). A lot of menstruation products' packaging and other aesthetic aspects of the commercialization of menstrual health and hygiene are often centered around stereotypically feminine colors and imagery (Lane et al., 2022). This may be an attempt at removing the stigma surrounding menstruation and the idea of menstruation being dirty. However, it ultimately reinforces the idea of menstruation being something that happens to women's bodies, and only to women's bodies. This poses major issues for cis-gendered women who do not menstruate, trans men who menstruate, and all non-binary people (Kosher et al., 2023). It excludes people who identify as women from being recognized as women, and it also forces participation in a perceived feminine activity upon those who do not want to be seen as feminine or as women. Some menstruating men avoid discussing menstruation as a way to "preserve masculinity" (Chrisler et al., 2016) because of the strong societal link between womanhood and menstruation, and how this goes against their gender identity. This sometimes leads to health issues due to lack of knowledge. Avoiding a topic means one misses out on information, which in turn can lead to issues not being discovered, and in turn, not solved.

Menstrual shame and stigma contribute to the continuation of patriarchy, and vice versa. This puts all menstruating bodies as well as all women in danger due to hostile sexism and heteronormativity and can limit their opportunities in for example education and their careers. Not only is this a potential threat to menstruating bodies physically, emotionally, and socially, but it can also lead to society missing out on important research being done. When people who would be doing the important research are not allowed to, or strongly discouraged from it, due to laws and regulations or social views on which tasks and professions are appropriate based on gender, society suffers. Regarding the mystification of the female body, there is a paradox. The mystification can be seen as empowering, but also exclusionary and can make menstruation seem difficult

to fully understand the scope of, making it overwhelming, especially to those who do not experience it themselves.

2.3 The Norwegian Curriculum

The Norwegian curriculum does not explicitly mention menstruation at all. On the website of The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, menstruation is explicitly mentioned a single time, and it is on a page about “the sexual body” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020a), in a paragraph on prevention and sexually transmittable infections. Menstruation mainly being discussed regarding topics of sexually transmitted infections is not only an issue in the Norwegian curriculum, but also in research (Chrisler et al., 2016). This shows a lack of understanding of the importance of sufficient information about this bodily phenomenon, and how researchers and the ones formulating curriculums all over the world need to put in more effort and work in this field.

The mention of menstruation in the curriculum is not themed around how it affects the body, or any basic knowledge about what it is, what can change, or how it is experienced. It is only mentioned in the sense that prevention can have different uses, like for example that some methods can be used to regulate menstruation (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020a). Menstruation is a big part of a person’s physical and mental health. It affects the body in multiple ways: some that are visible or can easily be tested by medical professionals, and some that are either difficult or impossible to find concrete evidence of. The core curriculum does state that students should gain competence that encourages good mental and physical health (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020c), and this is formulated in different ways in some of the subjects as well. In physical education, students are supposed to learn how to “understand how one’s body and others’ bodies are different (...)” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020e). In natural science, students are supposed to learn about both how the body’s organ systems work and how they work together, and “explain physical and mental changes during puberty and talk about how these can affect emotions, actions and sexuality” (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020d).

Although the curriculum does not mention menstruation explicitly, there are topics mentioned that do technically include menstruation. Despite this, because the curriculum does not explicitly mention menstruation, there is nothing that forces teachers to teach their students about menstruation, or that stops them from teaching it to for example only those of the female sex. The fact that most teachers are female (Han et al., 2020b) does not guarantee that students are taught what they need to know or can benefit from knowing about menstruation. This is partially because even adults can be misinformed, may only know about their own experiences or experiences like their own, or may experience some shame surrounding the topic as well. Some may also experience being judged if they bring up menstruation in the classroom, as it may be seen as pushing a political agenda that some may consider inappropriate, unnecessary, or otherwise unwanted in the classroom. Considering that there are politicians who push this belief (Nrk, 2023), this is not surprising. A curriculum that explicitly encourages, or demands, teaching about menstruation, would therefore benefit Norwegian schools. Instead of it being seen as a choice whether to teach students about this biological process that could

massively influence people's lives, it would be a requirement. How one teaches could still be up to the teacher, but this thesis is part of the argument for using literature as one of the ways to lower the stigma surrounding the topics of menstruation and gender identity in the classroom.

Despite the lack of mention of menstruation, there is explicit mention of gender and gender identity in the curriculum, often paired with mention of sexuality. The core curriculum mentions "kjønn" (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020c), which could refer to both sex and gender, as the Norwegian language does not have separate terms for these but rather requires specification before the word "kjønn" to distinguish between biological sex and the social construct that is gender. This vague terminology is an issue in general when discussing sex vs. gender using the Norwegian language.

In the curriculum, however, it presents a bigger problem by technically making it acceptable for teachers to avoid topics on the matter if it makes them uncomfortable, they do not think it is appropriate or necessary, they know too little about it, they forget, or it goes against their personal beliefs. The possible double interpretation of the word "kjønn" offers another reason why gender being discussed in the EAL classroom is important; there are more and better terms available in the English language on this than in Norwegian. With more precise terminology and defined competence aims, teachers cannot ignore topics of gender by interpreting "kjønn" to only involve sex. This may lead to the feeling of being slightly more restricted, but ultimately it will lead to more inclusive learning for students.

Beyond the competence aims mentioned above, there are competence aims in the English subject that can also support the use of literature to teach topics like gender, shame, and menstruation. For example, in the LK20 English competence aims for students in year 7, one can find competence aims that involve students being able to "investigate ways of living and traditions in different societies in the English-speaking world and in Norway and reflect on identity and cultural belonging" (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020b). This can be linked both to identity in the sense of sex and gender, and the way that our families' culture, traditions, and beliefs can change our views on a variety of things. Students are also supposed to "read and listen to English-language factual texts and literature for children and young people and talk about the content" as well as "initiate, maintain and conclude conversations about one's own interests and current topics" (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020b). This strongly supports the use of literature to introduce topics and to create interest in topics that may not yet, or ever, directly affect them, and encourage them to learn more about them. This will ultimately make them more capable of understanding others, through knowledge and not just empathy. Seeing as not everyone will empathize with others, at least having some understanding through having the necessary information is important.

The way that these competence aims support using literature in the EAL classroom is that although this specific novel is not a factual text, it can be reminiscent of real experiences of menstruation, and it can be the introduction of a topic in the classroom, and then the non-fictional texts can supplement the students' learning. Being able to discuss current topics and one's interests also comes into this, as students may not be comfortable with, or capable of holding conversations on these topics without something to get them started. A novel can create an interest in the topic but can also be used to

allow the students to distance themselves a bit from the topic in a classroom discussion. It allows them to discuss hypotheticals and the characters' experiences rather than discuss their own experiences, views, and potential issues.

Seeing as not everyone will be able to affectively empathize with others, at least having some understanding through having the necessary information is important, hopefully developing cognitive empathy, where one learns to intuitively understand other people's emotions (Fink & Rosnay, 2023). As for this thesis, the term "empathy" will be used to refer to both affective and cognitive empathy, as one can be considered more of a skill, and the other can be heavily influenced by genetics, head trauma, emotional trauma, childhood neglect and other factors (De Paul & Guibert, 2008; Knafo et al., 2008; Neumann et al., 2014). This means that the classroom can promote the development of both kinds but will overall have more of an impact on cognitive empathy than on affective empathy.

3 Methodology and Choice of Primary Text

My aim for this thesis was to investigate the potential of using the middle-grade novel-inverse *The Moon Within* to start classroom discussions about gender and shame in relation to menstruation. Additionally, the goal was to explore how this novel could help combat the shame that many seem to experience when it comes to menstruation, or lack thereof.

As I have decided to use only one novel rather than a selection of novels, this qualifies as a literary case study. Case studies provide an opportunity to explore topics in-depth with a singular example (Crowe et al., 2011), and how this is relevant in a real-world context (Yin, 2018). In other words, the novel I have decided to use in my analysis is only an example of a middle-grade novel one can use to create these EAL classroom discussions and relate them to the lives of Norwegian students. The results are not necessarily generalizable for all middle-grade novels with menstruation as a central topic because this thesis uses a singular middle-grade novel. Doing a literary case study did, however, allow me to go in-depth rather than explore the topic of menstruation-themed novels as a tool to start classroom discussions on adolescence, gender, and menstruation-related shame in broader terms.

For my thesis, I wanted to rather go in-depth using one novel than try to research the topic in a broader sense, as I believe this would be more beneficial to teachers who may want to use this research to assist them in planning menstruation-related lessons. A case study allows researchers to investigate how the novel can be used in a real-life context (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2018), more specifically in this case, in the EAL classroom. Although the results of my research may not be generalizable for all menstruation-themed middle-grade novels and their use in the classroom, they can still be used for further research on the topic, or to develop new ideas related to it. It is also possible to expand on the use of this specific novel in the classroom, perhaps with a focus on other aspects of the story and its themes, or the structure and how this can be a useful tool, or even a challenge.

I have conducted a desk study, meaning that only existing literature on the topics discussed has been used as secondary sources (Collins Dictionary), and I did not conduct interviews or collect data in classrooms or other relevant arenas. The theoretical framework based on the secondary literature is what supports my analysis of the chosen primary text. The research questions choose the direction of the analysis and discussion, while the theoretical framework is how the conclusion is reached.

I chose a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one. Whilst a quantitative method would focus on collecting data from multiple sources and could focus on numbers, interpreting these, and making assumptions based on the numbers, a qualitative approach focuses more on the textual data (Walliman, 2011). Qualitative research asks questions of how and why, which means that the questions asked should be open-ended and open to further exploration. According to Jennifer Anne Cleland (2017), this “enables deeper understanding of experiences, phenomena and context”. The qualitative method is reflected in the formulation of my research questions. In other words, qualitative methods can be used to go more in-depth on broader topics that either

have been or have the potential to be, researched using quantitative or mixed methods. Often in research with a qualitative approach, the results are non-generalizable, which is also true for my analysis. A small amount of primary texts, like for example my singular primary text, *The Moon Within*, provide examples rather than overall “truths” about broader topics (Creswell et al., 2023).

This thesis includes critical content analysis, a method presented in more detail in this section of the thesis, where part of the political lens used in the analysis is also introduced. Before this, a description of how the primary text was chosen and an introduction to the text and its structure is provided. To finish the section on methodology, some of the analysis’ limitations and ethical considerations are presented. An example of what is presented here is bias, and how one’s bias, more specifically mine, can influence the data used and how it is interpreted and used.

3.1 Choice of Primary Text

To be able to thoroughly analyze a text regarding my topic of choice in a master’s thesis, I decided to use only one novel, which makes this a literary case study (Lazar et al., 2017). This allows me to go deeper in my analysis than I would be able to do if I had used multiple texts. For a qualitative research project, using a singular primary text is acceptable, but had the research been quantitative, it would likely be more beneficial to use several.

I wanted my thesis to show how the English subject in Norwegian schools can be an arena for learning about menstruation and different topics in relation to menstruation. I decided that using a text aimed at middle-graders rather than younger children would be beneficial, as the English subject in the earlier years is more focused on building a basic vocabulary in English. English vocabulary surrounding menstruation is most likely not as relevant to very young children as vocabulary surrounding topics like family, school, hobbies and such. Also, the maturity of the students can play a role, and discussing menstruation with very young students may not be as beneficial to them as if one waits until fifth, sixth, or seventh grade. Both because of society’s views on menstruation, and the relevance to the students in terms of age and whether the students are far from starting puberty, just starting, or started puberty a while ago. I therefore selected a middle-grade novel, rather than a children’s novel although that could be beneficial if the class’s proficiency in English was not high enough to use a middle-grade novel. There are also arguments to be made for bringing the topic into the classroom earlier, as this may help the students avoid developing a negative view of menstruation, but having the vocabulary to understand is important. I therefore believe it would be more beneficial to bring these topics into the classroom early in a different subject than English.

My requirements for the text, other than it being a middle-grade novel, are reflected in my research questions, and included the novel having at least one prevalent gender queer character, the novel having menstruation as a central topic, and the novel portraying an experience of shame related to menstruation.

I decided to use *The Moon Within*, a 2019 middle-grade novel-in-verse by author Aida Salazar as the primary text for my thesis. This novel fulfills the requirements I set as it has menstruation as a main topic and heavily discusses this both with negative and positive views on menstruation, it deals with menstruation shame, and it also to some

degree discusses some of the mystified sides of the topic. It also discusses gender in relation to menstruation, as the main character's best friend is gender queer. The physical copy of the novel also has paratext that relates to some menstruation superstitions that are quite interesting to discuss regarding the mystification of menstruation and "womanhood".

3.1.1 Novel-in-verse

The verse novel is a relatively new genre and therefore has somewhat elastic definitions (Alexander, 2005). It can be considered a mixture of two out of the three genres defined by Aristotle; the drama, the epic, and the lyric - the verse novel being a hybrid of the epic and the lyric (Murphy, 1989). It is a genre that can create discussion by simply being mentioned, as it can be difficult to acknowledge it as its own thing, rather than just being a series of poems or other poetic literary works, weaved together in a way that creates narrative (Alexander, 2005). The novel-in-verse can be beneficial to use in children's novels as it can be linked to aspects of texts that children enjoy, like for example rhythm (Abate, 2018).

Each part, or chapter, is not very long and is often written in free verse, meaning that it does not follow a fixed rhyme scheme and does not use consistent patterns. This is also the case for *The Moon Within*. Another thing seen in *The Moon Within* is that each chapter is given a title, and is centered around a specific moment, incident, thought, or momentary feeling in the main character's life. This is also common across many works in this genre (Alexander, 2005). This style of writing can make the story easier to overcome for EAL learners, as it may be easier to stay concentrated on and motivated to read shorter sections that have a certain rhythm than it is to digest long paragraphs and chunks of text, especially if the learner struggles with attention deficit. Language-wise, the shorter sections of text can seem easier to overcome for EAL learners, especially if their proficiency in the English language is not very high. Instead of a large chunk of text with not much room between lines, words, and paragraphs, the learners can focus on verses of the poems of the novel.

The novel-in-verse structure of this specific novel, and generally, can make the novel appear more like a diary, as it offers a unique way of seeing the protagonist's thoughts on paper. In this novel, the style it is written in emphasizes Celi's emotions and how they appear in her head and her entire body, in the tempo that they appear in. The line switches, spaces between words, and placements of text all help bring Celi's thoughts and emotions to life. This is a trait of the novel-in-verse that is not often seen in novels written in prose (Bland, 2022). The difference this makes in terms of affect can be that the reader has an easier time engaging in the content, especially if the way it is written is similar to how the reader thinks or expresses themselves. This is also why poetry can resonate with people even if they have not experienced what is written about in the text they are reading; they can identify with some aspect of the writer, even if it is something as small as the rhythm or the pacing of the emotions and thoughts that are expressed.

Cognitive narratologists consider narrative understanding as a "process of building mental models as a result of text interpretation" (Tucan, 2013), meaning that one's interpretation and understanding of a text help us learn how different things work. Literature therefore shapes our perception of reality and the consequences of actions, and the literature the teacher brings into the classroom could be seen as part of the truth

of how the world works, as long as it is not too absurd to be of our reality. Because of this, the choice of literature needs to be made consciously by the teacher. This does not necessarily mean that only literature that is politically correct, or that goes with the values that should be taught in school, should be used. Instead, it means that if the literature used goes against these values, this needs to be a topic of discussion, before, during, and after the literature is used. For example, if one decides to bring literature that shows a lot of misconceptions about, and a negative view of menstruation into the classroom, this needs to be a topic of discussion. This discussion should preferably involve non-fictional literature to disprove the misleading input on menstruation so that the students do not create mental models that are unproductive, misinformative, and lead to misogyny or other discriminatory perspectives on people.

3.1.2 *The Moon Within (2019)*

The Moon Within is a middle-grade novel-in-verse published in 2019, written by Mexico-born author Aida Salazar. The novel follows the main character Celi's experience of going through the beginning of puberty. Celi experiences bodily changes in terms of her breasts growing, feelings of infatuation and attraction toward a boy, and her first menstrual bleed. She has a best friend, who at the beginning of the novel is referred to as Magda and uses the pronouns "she" and "her", but who, throughout the novel, discovers that the pronouns "he" and "him" are more accurate and that he prefers people to call him Marco. Marco is what is referred to in the novel as a *xochihuah*, which is described as "people who danced between or to other energies than what they were assigned at birth" (Salazar, 2019, p. 127), and is part of indigenous beliefs from the American continents. In other words, this is an umbrella term for people who are not cis-gendered, for example, trans or non-binary people.

At the beginning of the novel, Celi notices that something is happening to her body. She has a lot of questions, and she knows who she could ask to get answers, but she is too embarrassed to ask them. She starts being interested in a boy named Iván and thinks about him a lot. Celi's mother did not have a pleasant experience getting her period for the first time and experienced a lot of shame surrounding this. Because of this, she is very insistent on Celi's first menstruation being celebrated with a moon ceremony and starts planning this before it even happens. Her mother wants the moon ceremony to take place as part of the process of getting more in touch with their ancestors' culture and beliefs, as she is Mexican and practices traditional indigenous medicine. In the indigenous beliefs Celi's mother follows, a moon ceremony where other women in this indigenous community are invited to celebrate someone's first menstrual bleed, is highly important. The moon ceremony is significant because it allows for learning about the language and the cultural practices of one's ancestors.

Celi dances bomba, and this is a significant part of her life. She has gotten into this because of her Afro-Caribbean father's background. During bomba lessons, her best friend is also present, playing the drums. When Celi's best friend's mother reveals that he no longer wants to be called Magda, but now goes by Marco to fit his identity more accurately, Celi is at first a bit confused, although not hateful or discriminative of Marco. However, Celi's crush, Iván, is making negatively loaded remarks and comments about Marco, to him known as Magda. For example, he says Marco looks "straight-up like a

boy" (Salazar, 2019, p. 105) as an insult, and generally comments on Marco's gender expression, mostly using negatively loaded language.

Iván invites Celi to a birthday party and they start to get closer without Iván gaining any understanding or respect for Marco. When Celi fails to defend Marco while Iván is bullying him, Celi and Marco fall out and they do not talk for a while. Celi is hurt and upset but she is also scared to push her crush away by standing up for her best friend. As weeks go by with Celi and Marco not talking, Celi gets very upset. When Celi is at a dress rehearsal for a show where she will be dancing, and Marco is supposed to play the drums, Celi gets her period for the first time whilst wearing white pants. Marco notices this before Celi or anyone else and discretely lets her know. Celi is mortified to see her white pants soaked in blood and immediately goes to change in the bathroom. Marco helps her to the best of his abilities and their friendship starts healing as they are now talking again and Celi apologizes. Later, Celi's mother finds out about Celi's period starting and is happy for Celi. Celi still must mend the friendship with Marco and manages to do this during her moon ceremony. Marco also takes part in the ceremony and his gender fluidity is praised. Iván arrives at the ceremony and apologizes for his behavior, but Celi chooses Marco's side because they are best friends and that means more to her than her crush on Iván does.

There is some emphasis on the believed link between menstruation and the moon cycle throughout the novel, and this is also visible in the paratext in the physical copy of the book. This novel also explores an alternative view on menstruation and gender; two themes I aim to discuss in my thesis. The novel therefore provides space for discussions on different aspects of menstruation, both the positively and the negatively loaded sides of it, as well as a discussion on gender identity and how gender is a social construct.

The paratext of the physical copy of the novel includes an interview with the author, where she discusses Marco's gender identity, menstruation, her background and how it is connected to the novel, writing tips for aspiring writers, and representation in literature. The history of bomba is also summarized into two pages. As the final part of the paratext, there is a moon cycle chart, and the reader is encouraged to use this to mark when they first get their period, or their "moon" (Salazar, 2019). This feeds into the superstitions surrounding menstruation and its believed connection to the moon. There is also an encouragement to track emotions, regardless of menstruation, in connection with the lunar cycle, included. Seeing as menstruation throughout the novel is referred to as someone's "moon" many times, this superstition is a central part that will be mentioned in the analysis.

3.2 Critical Content Analysis

The umbrella term "content analysis" includes a range of research methods used to analyze text (White & Marsh, 2006), and the different approaches within these research methods. Content analysis methods include both quantitative and qualitative methods, and as previously mentioned, I have decided to conduct a qualitative study. In content analysis, this can indicate the use of discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, textual analysis, and social constructivist analysis (Neuendorf, 2002), all being different ways of analyzing text with a focus on its contents. By critically analyzing a text, a researcher closely examines a text, or an excerpt, to interpret the contents and see them in the light

of real-world narratives. This allows the text's contents to be contextualized into the society where it is being used.

Critical content analysis is a branch of its own on the tree of content analysis. Making a content analysis qualify as being "critical" signals and requires a political stance to be taken by the researcher. In critical content analysis, this political stance aims to challenge assumptions in society and to uncover or discuss its hegemonic structures. The structures and implied ideologies often challenged in critical content analysis often involve race, class, gender, or other aspects that have led to marginalization or ostracization of groups of people (Johnson et al., 2016). Values, ideologies, and who may have something to gain from these being maintained is questioned, especially considering who is presenting these so-called truths. What has led to these hegemonic structures' existence is also part of this, and the lens of the analysis is often pointed toward those of a marginalized group (Johnson et al., 2016). The research method aims to explore a text's potential underlying messages in relation to overlying structures of society, especially the society in which it was written, and how it may have influenced said society, and/or has been influenced by it.

This also means that critical theory is often used, as the theory should be coherent to the purpose of the analysis (Johnson et al., 2016). Having a clear goal with the analysis and selecting both relevant primary and secondary sources based on one's research questions, thesis statement, and political stance is crucial to productively and correctly use critical content analysis in research, and the analysis relies on a strong theoretical framework to support claims that are made. My critical content analysis focuses on some queer and feminist problems that are displayed in the novel, and the thesis is inspired by my political and ethical views on these problems. The marginalized groups in question for my analysis and my thesis are menstruating bodies, and those who do not conform to the gender binary and its stereotypical views on sex and gender.

All methods of critical literacy view literature as a way to potentially shape the world that we live in, as well as it being a way to gain insight into the society of the time and place a piece of literature was created. Therefore, not only being a critical reader but also teaching how to read critically, is one of the important tasks of teachers who work with literature (Johnson et al., 2016). To perform a critical reading of a text, it is recommended to read the text at least twice, the first read-through being to take an aesthetic stance and step out of the role of the researcher (Johnson et al., 2016). This is to engage with the text and become familiarized with it before analyzing it. I also did this for my thesis; I read the novel three times all the way through, the last two times being with an analytical lens. Some excerpts of the novel I also read a few more times, more specifically when analyzing them. When gathering data from the novel, I used a color-coding system that involved using colored tabs in my second and third read-through of the novel. The colors represented the following categories: negatively loaded phrases on gender non-congruence, positively loaded phrases on gender non-congruence, a suggested connection between the menstrual cycle and the lunar cycle, menstrual shame, disgust related to menstruation, and positively loaded mystification of menstruation and the female body where it is linked to divinity. This coding system was based on my theoretical framework and research questions and allowed me to better understand what the text is communicating. In other words, it allowed me to take a critical stance when reading the text.

I am using critical content analysis because some of the structures surrounding menstruation in our society are potentially harmful to many people. It being considered a marker of someone "becoming a woman," for example, indicates adulthood or the start of adulthood. Age-wise, this is problematic, as many start menstruating before they finish seventh grade, and by the age of 12-13, one is not at all an adult yet. The average age for someone's first menstruation is also decreasing (Betsu et al., 2023), meaning that humans may be even less ready for adulthood when first menstruating than they were previously, at least emotionally, mentally and financially. The concept of someone being an adult as soon as they start menstruating is still present in some areas and cultures of the world, and causes a lot of fear (Ramafalo, 2023), as most will still be children, and not mature enough to marry, have children and take on the role of an adult so early.

The idea of someone being mature enough to take on the role of a parent at such a young age belongs to the past, when life spans were shorter. It is a misconception that stems from a lack of research showing that children should be allowed to be children, without the responsibilities that adults have. Also, this notion is non-considerate of people's gender, as there are trans women who will never menstruate and cis-gendered women who also never will. In addition to this, there are non-binary people who may not identify with the term "woman" who will menstruate, and there are trans men who may start menstruating before potentially undergoing treatments that help them mirror their gender onto their body.

Therefore, not only does the view of menstruation marking someone 'becoming a woman' exclude trans women and other non-menstruating women from the equation. It also does not consider those who menstruate despite not identifying as women, and who may feel betrayed by their bodies (Frank, 2020) because of menstruation being incorrectly used as a marker of one's gender. Therefore, menstruation somehow signifying "womanhood" is deeply problematic, and this is a concept that can start a productive discussion in the classroom. As I aim to deconstruct and discuss these hegemonic structures in the classroom in this thesis, critical content analysis is the most appropriate method to use.

3.3 Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Conducting a desk study and therefore only using already existing literature means that one must be careful in deciding which secondary literature to use. Widely recognized theories that have a lot of support and have remained "high status" for an extended period can be necessary to use as support for my findings. This is an underdeveloped area of research, and my thesis can help expand the knowledge in this field. As the researcher in this case, it is also important that I am open to new research, especially because the topic I aim to investigate is not a widely researched one. This offers both opportunities and challenges. One of the opportunities offered is to discover areas where research is sparse and that could be discovered more. For challenges, perhaps the most important one to consider is that one's biases may have more influence on chosen literature than what is beneficial, and more than one is aware of. Also, lack of previous research could become a challenge, but if this challenge is overcome, the results are rewarding as one's findings will offer insight in an underdeveloped researched area. Digital tools can help in finding peer-reviewed texts, as well as providing information on how well-recognized journals and publishing companies are in the field, which can assist

in determining how trustworthy and relevant the secondary literature found is. Another way that one can determine credibility is to see if the research has been referenced, and how it has been referenced, by notable researchers in the field. For me, a university student, checking with my supervisors, who have done research in similar fields, has also been beneficial, especially as I have not done a lot of work in the field previously.

After determining the credibility of the literature and previous research I decided to use, I needed to check how relevant the literature was to my thesis. Although the literature I ended up using was relevant to my thesis, there is a possibility that there is literature out there that would have been relevant but that for whatever reason I do not have access to. There is a possibility that I am missing relevant references and points by not using the correct search engines or all useful keywords to search for literature. There could be key phrases, names, or words, that I did not search for when locating secondary literature, meaning that there could be a lot of missed opportunities in either proving or disproving points in the thesis. Language barriers can also limit access to useful and relevant information, and that is one of the challenges of conducting a desk study.

As my topic is not widely researched, there is no guarantee that the relevant research that does exist is using the phrases and keywords that I have searched for, but there could instead have been used different phrasing, meaning that these potentially relevant articles, book chapters and such may not end up in my search results on for example Oria. The limited research on the topic could also mean that some of the results presented do contain information that will later be disproven, as there has been a very limited amount of time where it has been possible to disprove it before it being used as secondary literature in research projects like this one.

In a similar vein, confirmation bias is always worth mentioning, as it is not uncommon for people to look for "proof" that their already existing conceptions of the world are correct, or that a theory they have is correct (Yin et al., 2016). This can lead to us discrediting information that may speak against what one believes is true (Kappes et al., 2020), or cause this information that is non-congruent to our theories and world-views to be overlooked. Confirmation bias can influence research both subconsciously and consciously. For example, a conscious way of letting bias influence research is by purposefully ignoring articles and literature that disproves what one is trying to prove. A subconscious way of being influenced by bias is by missing out on sources that may question one's stance because these texts do not show up as results with the keywords one decides to use when looking for secondary literature. Vocabulary will depend on one's background, values, and opinions, meaning that the keywords used to find secondary literature may not be sufficient to find all useful resources to support or disprove research findings.

This makes my job as a researcher a bit more difficult, as I have to try to not only prove my point or find research to back up my findings, I also have to see if there is anything that can disprove what I am saying and evaluate if this perhaps holds stronger than my own research. It is also important to note that theories are not objective truths; they are theories that can be disproven. Therefore, it is important to be aware of points made against theories used and to determine if the points against them perhaps can make it a weak theory to use in my own research, or if they do not affect the credibility of the theory enough to discard the use of it. Some theories may differ from each other, but they have some similarities, so choosing which aspects of different theories to use also becomes relevant; more theories supporting the same aspect of the theory, even when

disagreeing on other aspects can help support the use of at least certain aspects of the theory and/or theories used.

Another type of bias worth mentioning is the bias one has based on one's identity, regarding tangible traits like sex, nationality, and skin color, as well as more abstract traits such as gender, sexual orientation, interests, and more. Being a white, cis-gendered woman will have some influence on which aspects I focus on in my analysis, as will my interest in human rights and my political stance, just as this has influenced the overarching topic of my thesis. Although researchers should often try to be objective in their work, some subjectivity can still often be seen, even if there is only a hint of it. Being aware of one's bias provides an opportunity to explicitly challenge aspects of one's findings that are affected by bias, and I hope that the bias I am aware of within myself will allow me to do so. As for my personal bias, arguing for the de-stigmatization of menstruation is something one could consider me gaining something from, as it affects me. It also affects people I care about, and it aligns with my political views. On the topic of gender identity, more specifically focusing on transgender and non-binary people, this does not directly affect me as I am cis-gendered. In that regard, being cis-gendered could potentially make me less biased in that discussion.

Overall, bias is something every person is going to have, but being aware of one's bias is critical to being able to conduct research with valuable findings. If one is not aware of one's bias and considering this whilst conducting research and finding secondary sources, one's research can easily become very one-sided. Research should be nuanced and investigate more than one aspect of a topic. Some subjectivity will always be present in qualitative research, so awareness of bias is crucial. Especially when working with literature and doing a critical content analysis, bias will influence the study's findings. This does not mean that the findings should not be questioned, both by me as the researcher and by whoever will read this thesis.

As a final note regarding limitations, it is worth mentioning that a person's skin color and cultural background can affect their experiences in terms of menstruation and gender identity, and how accepted these aspects of their life are received by others (Butler, 2004). For the novel I have chosen, the main character has a black father and a Mexican mother. Her multicultural environment can affect her experience of menstruation, puberty, and adolescence. This, however, is not a theme I will be exploring in my thesis. One of the reasons for this is that this is not mentioned as a focal point, perhaps because there are more people of color present in the area where Celi is growing up. Another reason I am not focusing on skin color affecting one's experience of gender identity, menstruation, puberty, and acceptance, is that this deserves more attention than being briefly touched upon in a thesis of this length. The difference between menstruation experiences of for example white people and black people can, and perhaps should, be a thesis topic of its own. The Mexican background of both Celi's and Marco's mothers will be discussed in the analysis, as this is a major topic in the novel in the sense that it is used as a main reason for the celebration of menstruation, as well as the acceptance of gender fluidity.

4 Analysis

For this section of the thesis, an analysis of the novel *The Moon Within* is presented. This analysis focuses on gender identity, shame, and the mystification of the female body related to menstruation. The research questions of the thesis, and the theoretical framework, have shaped the focus areas of the analysis.

4.1 Gender Identity in *The Moon Within*

Gender identity is one of the prevalent themes of Salazar's novel. When Celi's best friend is first introduced, feminine pronouns and the name Magda are used. Further into the novel, this character wants others to address them with the name Marco and masculine pronouns. This is because he does not identify as a girl, but is exploring his gender identity, and realizing he is more comfortable with masculine pronouns and a typically masculine name. This is received differently by different characters, and they all portray attitudes towards gender fluidity, transgender experiences, and other aspects of gender that can be found in modern Western societies. In this part of the analysis, these different attitudes are explored, in the sense of how the attitudes are shown through behavior and what these characters are both implicitly and explicitly saying, especially about Marco.

The novel presents a view of gender as something fluid, internal, social, and less determined than a lot of modern societies present it as. This idea of it being fluid and social goes hand in hand with much of the research conducted in the field of gender and queerness, particularly the works of Judith Butler. As gender is often assigned based on biological sex, this creates a rather deterministic reality for most people in modern societies, as the gender binary and its limitations can limit people from freely living their lives and expressing themselves safely (The Fawcett Society, 2020). This view on gender is challenged in *The Moon Within*, which shows gender as a concept that is more fluid and less fixed. Gender being a social construct is not a new or unfamiliar concept, but it is still not very recognized, especially by those who have more conservative views on this. These conservative views are not based on realities from ancient times, but rather quite modern views; views that do not take gender fluidity into account, and that choose to ignore the fact that sex and gender are two different aspects of a person. An example of the difference between ancient times and the modern age is shown in *The Moon Within*, as Marco's parents use terminology from their ancestors' beliefs to describe Marco expressing his gender identity.

In a way, the novel does address that not being cis-gendered in the culture where Marco and Celi are growing up is not necessarily an easy life. On page 165, Celi's father says that Marco "doesn't have an easy road" (Salazar, 2019), acknowledging the challenges that trans and otherwise non-binary people can face, and the inherent transphobia seen in our heteronormative society. Despite work for inclusivity and Pride parades, these challenges are not only present in fiction, nor are they only present in the area where this novel is set; they are present all over the world, also in Norway (Norwegian Ministry of Culture and Equality, 2023). Celi's father also shows acceptance of Marco's gender

identity journey earlier in the novel, as he accidentally misgenders Marco in a conversation between himself and Celi, and immediately corrects himself (Salazar, 2019, p. 147). He does this despite Marco not being part of the conversation, showing genuine support for him rather than being performative; he acknowledges his own mistakes and Marco's identity even behind his back, in conversation with others. Celi's father is a genuine ally, as he gains nothing from correcting himself, other than spreading the message to his daughter that Marco's identity is valid.

Before Marco reveals his gender identity to Celi, some of his gender non-conforming behavior is praised. For example, when Marco shows no interest in "frilly dresses or makeup messes" (Salazar, 2019, p. 58), he is still known to Celi as Magda. Celi considers this a trait something that makes her friend "as awesome" as her crush, and more (Salazar, 2019, p. 58). Challenging the stereotype of what a girl should be interested in (and Celi does at this point see Marco as a girl because he has not yet expressed otherwise) is something that Celi sees in a positive light, so much so that she compares her friend to her crush, whom she is very infatuated with. Marco does, however, experience negative attention for not fitting into the stereotypes of what others think girls should do when he is not yet out as feeling more comfortable with masculine pronouns and a name that is considered masculine. The novel shows the gender binary at work in the negative attention that Marco receives, but also in how Celi looks at Marco's interests that are considered more masculine. She genders dresses and makeup, which shows that Celi considers these to be indicators of femininity. In other words, even though Celi sees this rebellion against the gender binary stereotypes as a positive, it still shows how deeply embedded these stereotypes are. This is a representation of how the gender binary is deeply ingrained in our modern society (Hoskin, 2020), and how early it is taught, as Celi is only a child. She already knows the expectations for her gender before she has even gotten her period for the first time. This reflects the real-life experiences of most people in Western societies (Rahilly, 2015).

This shows that although some can appreciate people doing what they want regardless of expectations and potential limitations, not all people are accepting of this. Perhaps there is some misogyny involved, as the criticism Marco receives, whilst still being known as Magda, is centered around him not being feminine enough for his then-assumed gender (Freeman & Knowles, 2012; The Fawcett Society, 2020); he does not fit into the limits that the gender binary has set for his assumed gender. He is mocked for not being girly enough, because they believe he should act a certain way because they see him as a girl, however not being very talented in being a girl. This points back to Berberick's (2018) notion of "passing" or "not passing". So even though others believe he is a cis-gendered girl, he experiences what is intended as misgendering by school bullies. This idea of "passing" is also addressed by Marco being mocked for being a *xochihuah*, as Marco is expressing his identity in a way that is considered rather masculine, but he still has a female body. This goes against the ideas of what people of a certain gender should look and behave like, again showcasing the limits of the gender binary and how this negatively affects people.

Towards the end of the novel, a ceremony is held where Marco's gender identity is addressed. It is done quite beautifully, and deeply connected to the ancestral beliefs of his family. In a speech given by his mother, the "duality" (Salazar, 2019, p. 214) of his gender and personhood is compared to the duality of day and night, sadness and joy, and death and life, and that "there cannot be one without the other". Further into the speech, Marco's mother honors him, expresses her love for him, and says that this is the

way “the Creator” made him (Salazar, 2019, p. 215), before Marco gets a chance to speak about his experience of discovering that he did not feel like the name and gender he had been assigned at birth was right for him. There is no moon ceremony held for Marco like there is for Celi. This ceremony where his gender identity is addressed takes place instead, showing his parents’ willingness to adjust tradition to fit the situation rather than following strict rules. There is no additional attention around Marco’s pending or already experienced menarche. Based on the research done regarding trans men and their avoidant relationship to their menstruation and the distress it can cause, this seems like a respectful solution to still celebrating his adolescence and beginning of puberty.

Marco is also previously referred to as a “sacred xochihuah” (Salazar, 2019, p. 128) by his father in the same speech where his father talks of a God in their culture who “protected people of all gender identities and queer folks” (Salazar, 2019, pp. 127-128), indicating an acceptance of his son’s gender queerness, supported by their cultural and religious beliefs. This not only shows gender fluidity and gender queerness in a very positive light but also highlights the difference between the families’ ancestors’ views on gender and gender in a lot of modern Western societies. Overall, a very positive and accepting view of gender fluidity is shown in the families of both Marco and Celi, contrasting the negative views portrayed by other characters earlier in the novel. Celi and Marco’s families represent the allies of queer people in society, while characters like Iván represent the misogynistic and transphobic people who can negatively affect the lives of queer people.

4.2 Menstrual Shame and the Mystification of the Female Body in *The Moon Within*

Celi is raised in a modern, Western society. This influences her view on menstruation and the overall bodily changes that she experiences due to puberty. The contrast between the views on menstruation throughout this novel addresses both sides; the one that almost glorifies the female body and menstruation, and the one that aims to hide these things, that promotes shame surrounding, or even disgust towards it. In a way, this reflects our society even without the indigenous beliefs presented in this novel; the ones that are disgusted by menstruation and make it more taboo, and the ones that try to normalize speaking about it and try to use menstruation and its believed connection to the moon as a source of empowerment.

Already on page 4, language like “the beauty of women’s bodies” (Salazar, 2019), referring to biologically female bodies, is used, and this is not the only time the female body and its functions are talked about in a glorifying manner. For example, Celi’s mother refers to Celi’s menstruation meaning a few different things, notably that it means becoming a woman (Salazar, 2019, p. 218). There is no reason to believe Celi’s mother is transphobic because of the language she uses, despite her using the term “women” when talking about female bodies and not necessarily women’s bodies. Still, the language is problematic, which the reader may notice because of the presence of Marco. Marco is not a woman, yet he, too, is likely about to start menstruating as he is biologically female and the same age as Celi. This mystification of the female body also creates a distance between the females of Celi’s family, and for example her father. This reflects how men are sometimes partially or completely kept out of the conversations necessary to understand changes in the female body and menstruation.

When Celi has gotten her first menstruation, her mother is as insistent that they should "honor" it (Salazar, 2019, p. 184), as she was before Celi's menarche. This goes against Celi's view on how menstruation should be treated and received by others, and she would prefer it to be a private aspect of her life. Menstruation causes embarrassment for her even before it becomes part of her everyday life, implying that she may think of menstruation as something unwanted, shameful, or wrong. She is also embarrassed and angry when her growing breasts are talked about in the home (Salazar, 2019, pp. 14-15), and wishes her mother would keep quiet about it. Meanwhile, her mother wants to celebrate her daughter's bodily changes. Celi's mother is trying to do the opposite of instilling shame surrounding one's body, and yet this causes discomfort for Celi, as the menstrual shame is already deeply ingrained in her because of society's view on menstruation. Her ancestors' beliefs are secondary to what she sees around her and what is considered the norm regarding menstruation.

After hearing her parents argue about the pressure she may feel about so much focus on her bodily changes, she expresses that she wishes her mother would listen to her father. He expresses that Celi is just a girl and should not be "pressured" about being a grown woman (Salazar, 2019, pp. 39-40). It can appear as if Celi wants to hold on to the innocence of being a child, and not having to deal with the qualms of becoming a grown woman yet. One can argue this is fair as she is still very much a child and menstruation does not end someone's childhood; it simply prepares the body for what comes after. Considering the sexualization by others that can be caused by menstruation (Roberts et al., 2002), hiding menstruation can be a defense mechanism to avoid such distress. Celi's mother, on the other hand, wants Celi's bodily changes to be anything but private. She wants to celebrate them, not only in a private setting with the family. Instead, she wants a ceremony to take place, where other people are also invited to celebrate Celi's menarche. This is an attempt at de-stigmatizing menstruation through reclaiming their ancestors' lost cultural practices, and to avoid Celi developing menstrual shame, but one cannot overlook the fact that Celi is already disposed to this shame and does not want everyone to be reminded of her experiencing puberty.

At the opening of the novel, Celi expresses that she has questions about her body and how it is changing. However, she is too afraid to ask these questions even though she knows who will be able to answer them. She is scared these questions are "stupid or gross or wrong" and it is explicitly stated that she is embarrassed (Salazar, 2019, p. 3). In real life, the fear of asking questions that may be seen as wrong, or embarrassing, can lead to a lack of information, or believing misinformation more easily. Both misinformed sources on the topic of menstruation and the fear of bringing attention to a topic that is uncomfortable because of the existing conceptions of menstruation in relation to gender or it being dirty can cause this problem (Betsu et al., 2023; Chrisler et al., 2016; Eyring et al., 2023). This does not have to be dangerous to all menstruating bodies, but it can be critical to others. For example, by not knowing what a healthy menstruation is and what are signs that something is wrong, menstruating people can miss out on cues that they need to see a medical professional. They can even believe that perfectly normal and benign aspects of menstruation are signs of poor health, or there being something wrong.

To Celi's mother, it is highly important that Celi does not feel the need to hide her development in terms of menstruation and other bodily changes caused by puberty, and that she is not ashamed of these. One of the reasons for this is that Celi's mother did not know what menstruation was or that her body would change in that way before it

happened, so she had a traumatic first menstruation, thinking she was sick because of the thick blood (Salazar, 2019, p. 85). This is also the main reason Celi's mother decides she wants to reclaim their ancestors' cultural practices and beliefs. The experience Celi's mother had with her menarche mirrors what many first-time menstruators feel when getting their period, especially the unprepared ones (Amann-Gainotti, 1986). One of the main reasons behind her finding it traumatic is expressed to be that she was not sufficiently prepared for what was going to happen, which is one of the main issues of first-time menstruators in real life as well. She often tells Celi the story of her first menstruation experience and tells her about the shame she felt. She states that she does not want Celi to feel the same, or to have questions when she starts menstruating (Salazar, 2019, p. 86). Celi, however, does not feel the need to share with the world what happens to her body and considers it "nobody's business" (Salazar, 2019, p. 45) to know about these things. After all, it is her body, and nobody else's.

Celi's emphasis on her body and her menstruation being her business and not anyone else's can both be a defense mechanism and a product of shame or disgust. Because of research conducted by Roberts et al. (2002), and similar studies, we know that people feel more comfortable sexualizing people when reminded of the target's menstruation, meaning that it is indirectly associated with loss of innocence. Unwanted sexual attention can cause a lot of discomfort and anxiety for the one receiving it. As can being seen as dirty or contaminating (Dunnavant & Roberts, 2013), as this causes alienation, which can also cause menstrual shame. If society teaches people that menstruation is something to be disgusted by, this is not going to make menstruating people feel comfortable being open about menstruating, and perhaps not even being comfortable menstruating silently, without talking to others about it. Hegemonic structures surrounding menstruation therefore are the biggest factors in developing menstrual shame. This, as well as the alienation due to menstruation, leads to mental health issues, and perhaps even physical health issues, for menstruating bodies (Chrisler, 2013; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013).

When Celi first gets her period, she is at dress rehearsal for a show where she will be dancing. Her best friend comes up to her, even though they have not spoken much since their argument, and discretely lets Celi know that the white pants she is wearing now have blood "all over them" (Salazar, 2019, p. 175). Marco is aware of what is happening and helps Celi by getting a pad, collecting her backpack for her, washing her pants, and generally supporting Celi through this experience which is embarrassing for her (Salazar, 2019, p. 177). Marco being biologically female and perceived to be a girl up until shortly prior to this moment, his mother also wanted to teach him not to be ashamed of his menstruation, and to host a moon ceremony for him. This is likely the reason he was able to help so efficiently and discretely; he understands that there are negative notions of menstruation existing, and what one can do in a situation where menstruation is unwanted or impractical. Had he been considered a boy from birth, it is not certain that he would have learned enough about menstruation to help Celi, as there are boys who do not have sufficient knowledge about menstruation to understand it (Torjusen & Eckhoff, 2016).

Celi is worried that people will see, or otherwise find out that she has started menstruating, and that she bled through her white pants. She begs Marco to not tell anyone, and Marco obliges. In this part, Celi's shame surrounding menstruation is clearly shown, as she is worried that people are going to see that she has "made a mess" (Salazar, 2019, p. 177) of herself. The idea of bleeding through one's clothes whilst

menstruating being to “make a mess” shows that the idea of menstruation being something dirty is ingrained in Celi’s psyche. Due to the human instinct of staying away from things we consider dirty due to risk of infection and disease, this view on menstruation is extremely harmful. The potential of alienation being the outcome of others seeing one’s menstrual blood is the same as the potential of alienation based on disease and infection, like the alienation that people with for example HIV, AIDS, and leprosy (Stangl et al., 2019). It is uncertain if Celi fears humiliation, alienation, both, or other possible outcomes from people seeing her menstrual blood, but regardless of which is her main concern, she is not alone in this fear.

The blood itself is not necessarily what Celi is embarrassed of, as we all have blood in our bodies, but the associations connected to menstrual blood, in particular, are likely what is causing the shame. Further, Celi tries to hide the fact that she has started her menstruation, but “there is no more hiding” when her mother sees that she is no longer wearing white pants like she was supposed to, and her face looks uncertain and defeated (Salazar, 2019, p. 179). The defeat of not being able to hide the truth of her body changing tells the reader that she is deeply ashamed of what has happened, and perhaps that she wishes it had not, especially in the situation it did.

The mystification of the female body and superstitions related to menstruation are seen both in the novel and in the paratext. Both the novel and the paratext lean into the idea of the lunar cycle affecting the menstrual cycle, and there being a connection between these two beyond the similar cycle duration. As mentioned in the theoretical framework of this thesis, seeing a connection between the female body and some of its possible functions, like menstruation, and the moon can be empowering for some. Meanwhile, it may evoke more negative emotions for others, like feeling left out, or there being a disconnect between the associations implied, and how one identifies.

Already from looking at the novel’s title, *The Moon Within*, the use of the moon as an allusion to menstruation is presented to the reader as a central point, for example in the chapter title when Celi has gotten her first period, “Moon has come” (Salazar, 2019, p. 176). Menstruation being someone’s “moon within” is also addressed in the novel, as Celi’s mother refers to it as Celi’s “moon within” (Salazar, 2019, p. 209). The moon is also generally strongly associated with women throughout the novel. For example, Celi’s mother says to her on page 87 “The moon belongs to all women (...)” (Salazar, 2019), implying a connection between Celi’s gender and this specific celestial body. When Celi has started menstruating, her mother says to her that the moon is hers now too (Salazar, 2019, p. 180). This implies that by menstruating, Celi has become a woman, as, according to her, women are the ones the moon belongs to. Celi’s mother also says that Celi’s body has “come into the moon” (Salazar, 2019, p. 184) when she has started menstruating. Shortly after, she also says that Celi’s first menstruation means leaving her childhood behind and becoming “a new moon, a woman” (Salazar, 2019, p. 218).

This emphasizes the view of menstruation meaning adulthood to some extent, even though Celi is still a child at the end of this novel. Menstruation being considered something that women experience is not only potentially problematic as it is exclusionary to people regarding gender, but it also implies a loss of innocence. Celi is expected to act more like a woman than like a girl now that she has gotten her first period. Although Celi’s mother does not sexualize her, this view of menstruation meaning womanhood, and in turn adulthood, can explain some of the reasons why it is more comfortable for some people to sexualize someone when reminded of the existence of their menstruation

(Roberts et al., 2002). The moon is a celestial body that is not as strongly associated with maturity or sexuality, at least not to the same extent as something that comes out of someone's reproductive organs. This may be part of the reason for the use of euphemisms like calling menstruation someone's moon. If there was no stigma, euphemisms would not be necessary (Newton, 2016).

Celi's mother seems to consider the believed connection between the lunar cycle and the menstrual cycle to be empowering. She also is upset when she is talking to Celi about it being her "moon" and Celi responding that it is "a period, (...), not a moon" (Salazar, 2019, p. 9). Her response is that because the length of the cycles are the same, although they are not actually the exact same length, it is a "moon cycle" (Salazar, 2019, p. 9). Not only is this slightly incorrect information about the menstrual cycle, but it also enforces the belief in Celi that there is a connection between her reproductive system and this celestial body, and that her body is somehow dependent on it. The connection Celi feels to the moon as she gets closer to her first menstrual experience, and after this happens, shows that the belief of there being a connection between the two is strong. To Celi, this seems like a positive thing, as she almost seeks comfort in the moon, even though she also associates it with the thing she fears and is ashamed of, menstrual blood. The moon is even presented almost like a character in some instances, like Celi referring to it as a dancer (Salazar, 2019, p. 9), Celi using the moon's name Luna to refer to it (Salazar, 2019, p. 163), or when Celi's mother refers to it as "Grandmother Moon" (Salazar, 2019, p. 208). The representation of it as being a grandmother can support the comforting feeling Celi gets from feeling connected to the moon. As can it being a dancer in her eyes, as that would then be something they have in common. To Celi, the believed connection to the moon can therefore be a positive thing, although for others it may make them feel distanced from their femininity if they do not feel connected to the moon, or their menstrual cycle may be irregular, and not follow the lunar cycle.

As mentioned previously, the mystification of the female body can create a sense of it not being possible to understand, which I believe can lead to the lack of attempt to gain understanding. If one could never understand something, why try? Celi refers to her menstruation, before even getting it, as her "body's secret" (Salazar, 2019, p. 9). On page 86, the reader finds out that Celi's mother stresses their ancestors' view on menstrual bleeding as something powerful (Salazar, 2019). Menstruation is compared to flowering several times throughout the novel, as well as to the metamorphosis that butterflies go through, and that it has great rewards despite it possibly being painful (Salazar, 2019, p. 183). Making connections between divinity and the female body is often an attempt at putting the female body in a positive light and removing shame. However, the glorification and sometimes mystification of it can make it seem incomprehensible, and sometimes even unattainable. For trans women, there are aspects of the female body that they will never experience, but that are so closely associated with femininity and womanhood that this may make them feel excluded or not sufficiently feminine. In addition, it can make trans men and non-binary people feel like they are forced to be associated with femininity on a level they are not comfortable with. Of course, they can use contraceptives that cause amenorrhea, but these also affect their hormone levels and is something male bodies do not have to do to avoid menstruating. It can also cause misinformation, as even the idea of the menstrual cycle depending on the lunar cycle or being connected to it is misinformation, and believing this can make other similar myths easier to believe because of the associations one can make.

Overall, the novel presents multiple ways of viewing menstruation and explores the experience one young girl has of her first menstruation and the way her mother speaks of it. The glorification of the female body and how it relates to 'womanhood', makes the reader question how this is experienced by Marco, someone who has a female body but does not identify as a girl and someone who will become a woman. It also begs to question the notion of growing up by starting to menstruate, as the main character is obviously very young, and even her adult father acknowledges that she is still a child and not a grown woman.

5 Discussion

This discussion aims to relate the findings of the analysis to the classroom potential of the novel in relation to the themes of the research questions. *The Moon Within* tells the story of a young girl's early pubescent experiences, and her best friend's journey of discovering his gender identity. This fictional story is set in a realistic world without magical elements, although superstitions, cultural practices and myths are mentioned. Through this setting, the author uses fictional characters to represent many different views on gender and menstruation, and highlights some of the problematic hegemonic structures of our society related to these topics. Discussing these structures in a classroom setting can be part of deconstructing them.

The fact that this novel is set in the same world as the one the reader lives in, as it is set in our world, is something I believe can be used as a tool in the classroom. That is because it opens for classroom discussions on real-life issues regarding the policing of the female body, transphobia, menstruation practices and perspectives, and more to show that even though this is not set in Norway, it is close enough to our reality. In a classroom setting, one can therefore introduce specific laws and regulations, religious rules, newspaper articles, political statements, social media posts, and statistics revolving the topics of gender identity and menstruation. This is also possible if using a novel with magical elements, but this could lead to the lines drawn being considered far-fetched and reaching to find connections to the real world, and if it is too unlike our world, some readers may struggle to see the relevance to their lives.

On the topic of gender identity, this novel does a solid job portraying gender fluidity and being transgender as something positive, or even sacred. Still, the novel shows that those who do not live up to the gender binary's expectations can suffer by being treated poorly by others. The main source of Marco's suffering is being taunted and bullied by others for not fitting into the mold that the gender binary has given him as someone with a female body. The fact that he does not identify as a girl is not looked down upon by his family, his best friend Celi, or her family. It is other people, the outsiders, that cause trouble for him emotionally. For classroom use, *The Moon Within* by Aida Salazar can therefore be used to start discussions on gender identity, the fluidity of gender, and the limitations of the gender binary. The novel also portrays what studies show about who seeks out literature and other sources of information to understand gender queerness; the allies, the friends and family, are the ones seeking it out, not those who do not care about these people. This is another reason for the teacher to bring this novel, or other novels that feature gender queerness, into the classroom. As a society, we are not at a point where we can expect young learners to seek out literature on topics they have little or no association to, or interest in. Therefore, teachers need to carefully select what they bring into the classroom, to promote inclusivity, understanding, and knowledge development. Using this novel, where the concept of gender queerness is not presented in a negative light, but the gender queer tritagonist still being an underdog, creates a way for children to empathize with Marco.

Children are not unaware of the concept of alienation, otherness, or the concept of someone being an underdog in some sense. Therefore, bringing this in through a novel

with a protagonist that they may identify with, even if only partially, could teach them to empathize with people who deal with other potentially othering traits than the ones they have themselves. One of the reasons children may relate to, and therefore cheer on, an underdog is because children are often the underdog in their lives (Sævi, 2014). They may not be the underdog in their age group, but they rely on adults to learn how to do the basic things necessary to live. They are also not as physically strong as adults, and their brains are not as developed as the brains of adults. This makes them the underdog in many parts of their lives, and the idea of fairness is also often highly important to them. The underdog's position does not really offer a fair chance for the underdog, so when they still end up with a favorable result, this is seen as a victory for those treated unfairly. Cheering for the underdog is a common thing to do for most humans (McGinnis et al., 2017), so having a protagonist or a tritagonist like Marco, who may seem like an underdog in some sense, can teach children to empathize with those who do not fit the gender binary of Western societies, even if they are cis-gendered and comfortable with their gender identity and how society sees them.

This novel explores gender identity in a way that shows different views on the topic; we see Celi being a bit confused when Marco's gender fluidity is first brought up but okay with it quickly after, Marco's mother being very positive towards her son's gender identity and him finding himself, and we see Iván being quite hateful of Marco not fitting into the mold of what he thinks a girl should be, as he sees Marco as a girl for the majority of the novel. These different views on the topic offer a lot of opportunities for discussion in the classroom, as these different views can all be present in the classroom, or within the class's parental group. It is a polarizing topic in politics whether gender identity, transgender experiences, gender fluidity and such should be brought up to and around children, but children should have the opportunity to learn about this. Not talking about these topics, or other social justice issues, can lead to misconceptions that are ultimately harmful, either to themselves or to others. That does not entail them necessarily figuring out as early as possible what they identify as and want to be referred to as, it is about them not thinking there is a correct way and an incorrect way to be if one is of a certain gender. Feeling othered, incorrect, and out of place can create a lot of confusion and distress in a person's life, especially in early childhood. Therefore, it is crucial to discuss gender identity, and that finding out as you go how you feel about yourself, your gender expression, your interests, and other aspects of life, is completely okay. Most likely, it is healthier than trying to fit a mold that no one fits into because not only is it very restricting, but it is also not necessarily the same in all people's eyes.

The Moon Within offers a rather unique perspective on gender identity and menstruation for middle-grade literature. In this novel it is acknowledged that Marco, who does not identify as a girl, is still female, meaning that he will most likely start menstruating. Despite the heavy associations between menstruation and femininity, or womanhood, that are present both in the novel and in our society, this is not the focal point of what was supposed to be Marco's moon ceremony. Instead, his ceremony focuses on celebrating his discovery of his gender identity and how it relates to a god in the indigenous religion his parents believe in. This still presents an opportunity to discuss menstruation as a marker of femininity and womanhood. These opportunities include discussing menstruation in people who do not want to be seen as feminine but have no choice because of their biology and the associations their biological traits have to femininity, as well as the lack of menstruation in people who wish they had that to "prove" their femininity and womanhood.

Questions one can ask students regarding this can involve talk of people who are biologically female, identify as women, and yet do not menstruate, and whether this makes them less feminine or less of a woman. It can also lead to bigger discussions on feeling betrayed by one's body. Many biological traits cannot be controlled by the person with the traits but can still alter how others see them. Hair growth, menstruation, body fat placement, voice, and many other tangible factors can lead to others assigning someone a gender, regardless of whether they identify with said gender. A deeper voice, noticeable facial hair or body hair, and little to no body fat in certain areas are some of the factors that can be used to identify someone as a "man", even though these are all traits that women can also have, even if they are biologically female. The stereotypes of the gender binary are worth discussing from early childhood, as they can quite severely affect someone's life, and this novel offers many opportunities for this, both regarding physical markers of gender based on the gender binary, and the more intangible markers like interests and hobbies.

I have seen several students in my practice periods who have been embarrassed whenever certain aspects of puberty have been mentioned, but especially menstruation. This embarrassment related to menstruation is common all over the world (Betsu et al., 2023; Hennegan et al., 2022; Marván et al., 2014). Therefore, removing the stigma needs to be worked on in all classrooms. Often, children, and even adults, put menstruation on the same level as sexual activities, or fluids often related to sexual activity (Shenkman et al., 2023), when it comes to how embarrassed or disgusted they are when this is brought up. In a way, Celi shows a version of this as well in *The Moon Within*, as she does not dare to ask questions. She does not want it to happen, she does not want to talk about it or listen to others talk about it, and she does not want others to know that it is happening to her body.

This offers a lot of opportunities to talk to students about menstruation, what it is, and what it is not, as they may have experienced or will experience this themselves, or at least know someone who has or will experience it. For example, it can be useful starting with how it is not in any way related to sex, and it does not indicate anything about a person's lifestyle or whether they are sexually active; it only indicates that they have a uterus and that they are, most likely, not pregnant. The stigma surrounding menstruation is partially related to the idea of there being a link between menstruating and being sexually active, and how menstruation signifies womanhood and loss of innocence (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013). As this causes distress for menstruating bodies, learning early that there is no correlation between menstruating and being sexually active or not, can lead to fewer misconceptions and less self-policing related to this. This also has the potential to, over time, make the sexualization of female bodies based on menstruation associations, less prevalent.

As menstruation can play such a significant role in a person's physical and mental health, and even affect our social lives, it is crucial that we are all taught at least the basics of what menstruation is and is not. This includes what happens during menstruation, what are some menstruation signs that may indicate health issues, how it can affect a person's life, and how this can vary over time. I believe this would improve the quality of life for many menstruating people, and potentially lead to people seeking professional medical assistance earlier for problems that may appear or become more prominent when they are menstruating (Grandey et al., 2020; Seear, 2009). Discussing the myths surrounding menstruation and debunking them will also be helpful to menstruating people, as it will lead to less unnecessary suffering (Gokhale & Kumar, 2023). One of the ways to start

early with teaching this can be to desensitize children to the topic through, for example, literature. *The Moon Within* is a middle-grade novel, meaning it is written with children in mind. The themes and the language are therefore appropriate for children and can be easier to relate to for children than they would be if one were to use a novel written for young adults. Making it a common, casual, and normal thing to talk about currently taboo topics can help remove the stigma. This will also make it easier to ask questions about it to either gain insight into one's own menstrual health or to learn about how others may experience life differently from oneself (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2013; Seear, 2009).

The goal is to teach students to be productive, healthy people so they can live fulfilled lives and do well for others. This is reflected in the core curriculum, and somewhat in the subject-specific competence aims as well, and this novel presents the opportunity of discussing several topics related to social justice and health through the lens of a middle-grade novel. To circle back to the competence aims of the English subject mentioned earlier, this novel can be part of achieving these goals. The competence aims which state that students should be able to "read and listen to English-language factual texts and literature for children and young people and talk about the content" (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020b) may not seem very relevant as this novel is fictional. Still, the novel can be used to introduce topics in an interesting way that can create curiosity surrounding the topics presented, and it also offers an easier way to talk about them by using the characters to distance the topic from themselves to avoid embarrassment.

Further, the goal of students knowing how to "initiate, maintain and conclude conversations about one's own interests and current topics" (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020b) can be worked on using this novel as the topics at hand are going to be relevant to some of the students, and they are current topics even to those not directly affected by them. This is seen in newspaper articles and surveys mentioned previously, and there is still research being conducted on these subjects. Therefore, they are current and belong in the EAL classroom. Finally, for English subject competence aims previously mentioned, students should "investigate ways of living and traditions in different societies in the English-speaking world and in Norway and reflect on identity and cultural belonging" (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020b). *The Moon Within* presents different ways of living in terms of sex and gender, but also engages with cultural differences. Although this was not a focal point of this thesis, it can be used to move into the topic of cultural representation around the world when one has already discussed menstruation and gender. It becomes almost interdisciplinary, as it connects the topics of gender and menstruation with cultural differences and indigenous culture. Norway being a country with many different cultures represented, every classroom will be able to offer unique input in these discussions, as the mix of cultures, language backgrounds, religions, gender identities et cetera will shape the opinions and stories shared.

6 Conclusion and Further Research

To conclude this thesis, the major findings from the analysis and the relevance to the Norwegian EAL classroom will be reiterated before some ideas for further research are presented. As mentioned early in the thesis, this novel is multi-faceted and explores many different topics, and this thesis only explores some of them. The research suggested will be relevant to this thesis and its themes specifically, meaning that there can be other possible focus points to research that will not be mentioned. Just because they are not mentioned here does not make them invaluable to research.

The major findings of this analysis show that *The Moon Within* by Aida Salazar features perspectives that represent a lot of different views found in our society regarding menstrual shame, the female body, and gender identity. Further, the findings show that there is a plethora of opportunities for classroom discussions that are relevant to the Norwegian curriculum, both in terms of the English subject, and other areas of the curriculum, if one chooses to present this novel to one's EAL students. Despite the setting of the novel being very realistic and potentially very close to the realities of one's students, it still offers some distance between the students and the discussion topics presented by the novel. The students can discuss what they would do if they were in the same position as some of the characters, or one could even distance them a bit more and ask them what advice they would give the characters. By doing this, the potential embarrassment children may experience from speaking about these stigmatized topics can be decreased, or perhaps even removed, and the students will still be able to unlearn some of the stigmatizing misconceptions that are common in society.

Regarding gender identity, the novel shows different perspectives on this and different levels of acceptance of those whose gender does not conform to the gender binary's stereotypes and ideals. For example, Marco's gender fluidity, gender performance, and expressed preferred pronouns, is received in an array of ways. His family is not only accepting but even praises him for being a *xochihuah*. Meanwhile, other characters have either a neutral or even a negative perception of him because of his gender-nonconforming way of expressing himself. To summarize an answer to my first research question, "How does *The Moon Within* provide space for discussions on menstruation and gender?" I suggest that Marco's gender nonconformity and gender fluidity is a strong conversation starter. Whilst analyzing the novel, it became very clear that there is a conflict between gender performance and physical phenomena like menstruation being considered markers of someone's gender. Another aspect to discuss is the language used when trying to empower menstruating bodies, and how it can be harmful to refer to menstruating bodies as "women". Strongly linking menstruation to gender makes those who menstruate and do not identify as women part of a group they do not belong to. It also excludes bodies that do not menstruate, but that belong to people who identify as women, regardless of biological sex. To reiterate a notion I made early in the thesis, not all women menstruate, and not all those who menstruate are women. Therefore, the novel can also be used to show students that learning about menstruation should not be exclusively for those who may have first-hand experience with menstruation. Instead, menstrual health and hygiene should be taught to everyone, as it is a crucial part of the continuation of our species, and not something shameful, dirty, or contaminating.

Menstrual shame and the mystification of the female body are also represented in different ways in this novel. Celi shows the Western societies' hegemonic structures around menstruation, and how these can affect menstruating bodies emotionally in relation to shame and disgust. Celi's mother, on the other hand, tries to reclaim indigenous cultural practices lost due to the colonization of the continent where they live. These cultural practices involve celebrating menarche and viewing menstruation as something powerful. The female body is mystified in an attempt at removing shame, and instead empower menstruating bodies. Some of the language surrounding this is somewhat problematic as it excludes some women from being viewed as such. My second research question "How can shame surrounding puberty be combatted in the EAL classroom by the use of *The Moon Within*?" a look to the part of the analysis that focuses on menstrual shame and the mystification of the female body is warranted. The analysis shows the conflict between Celi's mother's intention, and how Celi actually experiences menarche and other changes caused by puberty. The reader sees Celi struggle emotionally due to the stress of going through puberty, especially regarding the physical changes her body goes through because of it. In a classroom setting, this can be used to discuss the questions of why Celi feel like she needs to hide certain signs of her body changing, when these changes are completely normal. Talking to children about this can help develop a menstrual neutrality, as well as a neutral perspective on other aspects of the body changing because of puberty. Promoting a neutral view on menstruation, both for menstruating bodies and non-menstruating bodies will lead to reduced stigma, which in turn can also debunk myths and misconceptions. Hopefully, this will also contribute to the de-sexualization of menstruation.

Based on the findings of this analysis, *The Moon Within* offers many opportunities in the EAL classroom. The structure of the novel-in-verse offers unique openings for reading for students whose English proficiency is not very high or who struggle with attention deficit. In addition to this, learning the terminology related to this novel and building a vocabulary in English that is relevant to these topics, will help students be able to not only express themselves but also to find information they need on them. There are words in English than in Norwegian, that can be more efficient to use when discussing gender, for example the distinction between sex and gender, which are both known as "kjønn" in Norwegian. This also makes it easier for teachers to efficiently and correctly teach students the difference between these two. Competence aims in the Norwegian curriculum, both in the core curriculum and the competence aims specific to different subjects, focus on the health of students in Norwegian schools, as well as cultural awareness. Not all necessary information on these topics is available in Norwegian, but learning about them in the lingua franca that is English, students will have access to more information. This will help their overall development, and assist them in forming informed opinions and understanding the world around them better.

As for further research, one of the things one could do is compare menstruation-themed fictional books meant for different age groups and the portrayal of menstruation. The same goes for fictional books where gender identity is a major topic. Another interesting topic to investigate could be non-fictional children's books that deal with menstruation as a topic, and how informative these books are, regarding what happens, and who experiences it. How it explores potential shame or other negative effects of being someone who menstruates, will potentially menstruate, or has menstruated, should also be part of this. Children's books where gender identity is discussed explicitly are not a very explored topic, as these books are not very common. I do, however, believe that

there will be more of this in the future, although I believe the increase in the number of these books will be a slow one.

There has been a significant increase in literature for young readers that involve queer characters (Blackburn et al., 2015), but there is not as much traction yet surrounding menstruation-themed literature, or that much menstruation-themed literature at all (Chrisler, 2007). Also, the increase in queer literature is most prominent in young adult literature rather than children's literature, potentially stemming from queerphobic beliefs about queer people and allies pushing an agenda onto children. The common misconception that education that teaches children about sexuality, gender, reproductive health, and other similar topics will make children more sexually active and at an earlier age (Chothe et al., 2014) may also be a factor. When there are more children's books on gender identity, looking into the authenticity of these could be interesting. Especially regarding who the authors are, and how their gender identity has been met, as this can be experienced in very different ways by people.

As previously mentioned, I did not dive into the topic of skin color and its effects on the experience of gender identity, menstruation, and acceptance, but giving this the attention that it deserves by centering this in a thesis can provide valuable research in a more and more globalized society. It is unlikely for teachers, at least in Norway, to never teach students that are a different skin color from their own, regardless of which skin color one has. I therefore highly encourage that more research be done on this, perhaps especially using children's literature to explore it.

All in all, this thesis shows that the use of the middle-grade novel *The Moon Within* in the Norwegian EAL classroom can be useful to start many productive classroom discussions and to unlearn harmful stereotypes based on the gender binary and misconceptions about menstruation. It can also be used to learn vocabulary necessary to gain important and sufficient information on gender, menstruation, and other related topics. These are all important to a person's mental and physical health. Therefore, using literature about these topics in a classroom setting should be encouraged in Norwegian schools, especially in the EAL classroom, as Norwegian is not a lingua franca, meaning that the information available on these topics in Norwegian is automatically limited. There is a need for more research on menstruation and the many aspects of life related to menstruation, and this thesis offers part of this with the help of literature as a tool.

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