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The Interplay of Horror and Disgust: A Critical Exploration of Repressed Abjection in *Tender is the Flesh*

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Abstract

*Abjection can be defined as a feeling of intense discomfort or horror triggered by stimuli that can disrupt one's sense of identity or normalcy. This feeling of discomfort and horror arises when a person is faced with something that is considered taboo or repulsive. *Tender is the Flesh* explores a dystopian society where all the animal meat has been contaminated and rendered it unconsumable by humans. This pushes the humans to consume humans resulting in institutionalized cannibalism forcing individuals to suppress moral and reactions of horror and disgust to it. Through the lens of Julia Kristeva's abjection theory, which examines how the human psyche reacts to disruptions in the boundaries between self and other, this novel examines the fallout from enforced desensitization to violence and bodily violation in a society. While much of the existing literature emphasizes the novel's critique of capitalism, cannibalism, power dynamics and dehumanization, there is a lack of exploration into how abjection, even when systematically repressed, re-emerges. This research will investigate how *Tender Is the Flesh* exhibits the inevitability of abjection, showing that suppressed feelings of disgust and horror ultimately surface through physical interactions, and emotional breakdowns, thereby challenging the facade of normalization in the society.*

Keywords: Abjection, Disgust, Horror, Other, Self.

Introduction

Tender Is the Flesh is a dystopian novel written by Argentine author Agustina Bazterrica. It was originally published in 2017 and translated into English in 2020. The novel describes a dark and disturbing world where cannibalism has become a normalized part of society. A virus has mysteriously wiped out all non-human animals, compelling society to look for a new meat source. Society begins to breed and raise humans for the human flesh consumption, or 'special meat' as they called it in the novel. The protagonist, Marcos Tejo, works as a processor of human meat in a slaughterhouse and is confronting the horrors of his occupation while trying to neglect and compartmentalize his morality. He becomes increasingly disturbed

by the system of society, and the way he is enthralled by it, as he begins to question the reality to which he is surrounded. This study explores the repression and the inevitable resurfacing of the abjection in *Tender Is the Flesh* through the abjection theory of Julia Kristeva.

Theoretical Framework

Julia Kristeva's seminal work, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980) introduced abjection as part of psychological and cultural procedure in humans which makes them to establish and maintain the boundaries between a self and something scary or dirty. This book also defines abjection as subjective horror that arises from the confrontation with objects such as corpses or bodily fluids which blur the boundary between self and other. Drawing from psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan, she argues that abjection is essential for the development of the self, as it marks the initial separation from the maternal body and the entry into the symbolic order of language and social norms. Kristeva identifies the maternal body as a primary site of abjection, symbolizing both nourishment and danger, attraction and repulsion. Her theory also critiques how societies create taboos around the abject to maintain social order, marginalizing elements that challenge cultural norms.

Research Objectives

- To analyse the repression of abjection in *Tender Is the Flesh* through Julia Kristeva's abjection theory.
- To investigate the role of the maternal body, bodily dismemberment, flesh, blood and language in shaping abjection.
- To explore how the repressed abjection resurfaces in violent and disruptive ways.

Dystopian World of *Tender is the Flesh*

Crises signify a moment of interruption or breakdown in a given order. In compromising an order, crises suspend habituated ways of acting in the world, forcing us to reconsider our place within it. Such disruption compels us to search out causes which can, in turn, expose structural problems, unknown or disregarded, within a given order. Crises are thus critical moments in relation to which significant changes can be fostered (Zebrowski, 37)

Tender is the Flesh has the setting of a society that has seen the “Transition”, a worldwide change against a crisis in which humans are produced and eaten as “special meat” following the vast elimination of animal meat due to the spread of a virus. While navigating his moral dilemma, the protagonist, Marcos Tejo, oversees the production of human meat at Krieg, a slaughterhouse for humans. The tragedies in his personal life include the death of his son Leo at his infancy, the divorce of his wife Cecilia, and the dementia that his father has. A supplier presents a female “First Generation Pure” (FGP) human to Marcos. He names her Jasmine, which is against the law in this culture, after initially treating her like livestock and then coming to regard her as more than a product. Marcos develops an intimate relationship with Jasmine, who eventually becomes pregnant. This leads to a dark turn in his life.

Repression of Abjection

In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the theme of repressed abjection appears on both personal and societal levels, reflecting Julia Kristeva's idea that what society casts out as impure eventually resurfaces in violent ways. The dystopian world depicted in the novel seeks to hide the horror of cannibalism through institutionalized slaughter and the manipulation of language. However, this repression is fragile, as moments throughout the novel reveal that abjection lurks just beneath the surface. The portrayal of the revulsion towards flesh and blood proves that no matter how normalized the industry is, the grotesque reality of human slaughter remains unsettling.

Revulsion towards Human Flesh and Blood

Julia Kristeva, in her essay *Approaching Abjection* says, “The corpse — seen without God and outside science — is the height of abjection” (Kristeva, 127). The flesh of humans and the corpses reminds people of their vulnerability and the inevitability of their imminent death. The abject is constantly pushed aside or repressed in order to continue living. In the novel, Marcos feels revulsion towards flesh of humans, specifically after the loss of his son. “It occurs to him that in this case, the flesh trade is literal, and he’s disgusted” (Bazterrica, 159). This disgust towards the flesh trade can be seen when he is invited to eat with Urlet, owner of a trophy hunting reserve. They serve “fingers in a sherry reduction with candied vegetables” (Bazterrica, 158) when he tries to escape from eating the fingers but he is forced to. Although Marcos works in slaughter industry, he frequently experiences feelings of nausea and disgust towards human meat. The struggles of Marcos to embrace the system he works in suggests that the abject is not repressed completely but still lingers in him.

Jouissance of the Abject

Sometimes or for some people, the abject creates pleasure or as Kristeva describes as “jouissance”. She says “One does not know it, one does not desire it, one simply enjoys it” (Kristeva, 131). This primal and unmediated enjoyment arises from the abject being feared but also desired. Jouissance from the abject is portrayed when Marcos interviews two candidates who have applied for a job in the slaughterhouse. He takes the two of them around to show the procedure of processing the human meat. These two symbolise the two extremes of abjection. The first applicant is seen to show physical signs of disgust and fear. The second one is the other extreme, who enjoys the abject. He enjoys the bodily dismemberment, the blood, the flesh, and the very act of killing a person for meat. Both these applicants exhibit how abjection is not only pushed aside, but a primal part of humans also feel attracted to it.

The Maternal Body: A Site of Abjection

Julia Kristeva’s theory positions maternal body as a site of abjection and as a primal source of horror. The maternal body is an independent entity but also houses a separate and dependent entity. This blurs the distinction between self and other. Joanna Frueh talks of the abject maternal in her book *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* as:

Julia Kristeva’s Powers of Horror ... has greatly influenced feminist theorizing of the body. Here the mother (-to-be) epitomizes abjectness: she enlarges, looks swollen, produces after-birth, lactates, and shrinks; she is beyond the bounds of even normal female flesh and bleeding; she is breakdown, dissolution, ooze, and magnificent grossness. The mother is perfectly grotesque, a psychic monument to the queasy slipperiness that is the liminal reality of human embodiment (133).

In *Tender is the Flesh*, the maternal body is not seen as a life giver but as producer of humans who are destined to end up as meat. The commodification and exploitation of maternal body intensifies the abjection. Jasmine is biologically human but she is treated as a livestock. Her pregnancy is reduced to a biological process which serves Marcos’ need. Cecilia, the wife of Marcos, lost her child which led to their separation. This loss exhibits how in a world where human birth is reduced to meat, the meaning of birth is completely redefined. The maternal body of Cecilia is not seen as site of creation and mirth but as sorrow and loss. Pregnancy is seen as a mechanized function of capitalism and cannibalism. This abject is suppressed to hold the traditional familial values of the consumers of special meat.

Language as a Barrier Against Abjection

Let us enter for a moment into the Freudian aporia called originary repression. A curious origin, this, where what is repressed does not really fit in its place, and where that which represses always borrows its force and authority from what is apparently very secondary: language (Kristeva,135).

The theory of originary repression, as Freud theorized, involves a deep paradox: how can something be repressed if it exists before the creation of a conscious subject? This “curious origin” suggests that the repressed factor does not have a stable position in the psyche. Repression’s force does not arise out of some originary, genetic mechanism, but instead “borrows its force and authority from language.” This emphasizes the Lacanian view that the symbolic order, that is, language and social customs, paradoxically organizes the unconscious. Although appearing to be secondary to the primal experience, language enables the subject to try and make sense of the real. “The unconscious is structured like a language”. (Thus, the same tool employed to know reality is the tool employed to repress elements of that reality in *Tender is the Flesh*.

Language is used in the novel to normalize the new society following the transition and to push aside the abject. “There are words that are convenient, hygienic. Legal” This quote shows how people use language to conveniently escape guilt, horror and disgust. The term heads refer to humans raised for meat, while FGP (First Generation Pure) refers to those who are not genetically modified. The production of the human meat is described as producing special meat. This is to dehumanize them and remove them of their individuality. “The human becomes a mass-produced consumer product, reduced to the materiality of its edible body” (Hendrichs). Here, language is employed to avoid the moral ramifications of eating humans and to normalize cannibalism. It is used to suppress the abjection that arises in them.

As language serves to repress abjection, it is also stripped from the heads to diminish their autonomy and to render them less than human. The heads, integral to the production of special meat, are deprived of their vocal cords. Jasmine, the FGP shown to Marcos, is voiceless and consequently easier to control. Lacking language and existing in an environment devoid of interaction, results in these individuals being unaware of their own identity and limits their capacity to understand the world. This facilitates the repression of abjection for those who work in the slaughterhouse.

Resurfacing of the Abjection

The repression of abjection is a key mechanism that enables society to operate, even as it progresses into institutionalised cannibalism. As suggested by Julia Kristeva’s theory, abjection cannot be permanently expelled, and it always reemerges in unsettling and destabilizing manners. The novel illustrates this resurfacing on both personal and societal levels, showing that what is forcibly suppressed always returns with greater force. “In such, in the truly abject despite its multiple and varied forms, we locate the powers of horror” (Walker). On the societal level, the government implements linguistic manipulation to create distance from the horror of human slaughter by employing clinical language for the butchering process. However, these strategies fail to completely conceal the underlying horror, as the tangible reality of human bodies such as scars, facial expressions, and bodily fluids continually undermines the illusion of detachment. This conflict shows that irrespective of how language is altered, the body remains a site of abjection that resists erasure.

On a psychological level, Marcos represents the conflict of repression and its unavoidable collapse. Although he tries to numb his moral discomfort, his unresolved grief over his son, his mixed feelings toward Jasmine, and his dread of slaughterhouses indicate that he has not genuinely accepted the system. He has merely suppressed his revulsion towards flesh. As Kristeva records,

the more abjection is repressed, the more violently it returns. This is also illustrated in the novel's revolting climax, when Marcos, after struggling against complete assimilation into the system, ultimately succeeds when he strikes Jasmine and takes her to the barn to slaughter. Marcos says, "She had the human look of a domesticated animal" (Bazterrica, 219). This moment marks the complete collapse of repression. His last link to human morality is cut off, and he completely embraces the horrifying reality he previously opposed. The novel ultimately shows that repression does not eradicate abjection; it only delays its reemergence, causing its eventual return to be even more devastating and unavoidable.

Summation

It is not then an absence of health or cleanliness which makes something abject, but that which perturbs an identity, a system, an order; that which does not respect limits, places or rules. It is the inbetween, the ambiguous, the mixed. (Kristeva, 127)

Kristeva muses on how, when order is challenged, and boundaries are violated, the abject resurfaces to destabilize the symbolic order. This study investigates *Tender Is the Flesh* using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, particularly the repression and re-emergence of the abject. The society in the novel creates a framework where abjection is intentionally repressed using language, bodily dismemberment, and desensitization, seeking to normalize human meat consumption. But it is disrupted by things like flesh, blood, and the body of the mother, as the persistent tension between that which is pushed away and that which will not disappear emerges. The body of the mother, represents both birth and death and is a site of great abjection. Abjection breaks out even in spite of efforts to confine the horrors and disgust of them, which is evident through Marcos' breakdown. His repressed abjection increasingly appears in his unease with killing, his desire for Jasmine, and his fall into the very system, he previously fought against. By this analysis, the research has achieved the objectives brings to the fore how the novel deconstructs dehumanization, demonstrating that efforts at repressing the abject only guarantee its inevitable and violent return.

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