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THE CONCEPT OF ABJECTION IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JULIA KRISTEVA

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Abstract:

Expulsion of what seems to be strange to oneself or Abjection is a central phenomenon in the notion of subjectivity in Julia Kristeva. Julia Kristeva defines Abjection as the act of discarding or negation of what seems to be a part of the self where the meaning collapses disrupting the symbolic order. For Kristeva, the abjection is a means of forming an identity. This is similar to the process through which societies are constructed. As a phenomenon that never entirely receded, abjection haunts the settled identity of the speaking being by threatening to unravel what has been constructed. The self for Kristeva is never settled and unshaken. To keep hold of oneself a subject must remain vigilant against that which could reshape the borders of the self. This element that is excluded or abjected become the strangeness or the foreignness within the self. This implies a state of permanent questioning and transformation of the speaking being. In Kristeva, the radical exclusion that comes within, later becomes the foundation for the disruption in the settled symbolic giving way to the formation of the subjectivity which is never settled and constituted once and for all. This paper is an attempt to understand the act of abjection or exclusion of the foreignness that tends to threaten the stable identity as a process.

Keywords: Abjection, Stranger, Identity, Subjectivity, Kristeva, Speaking Being

Introduction:

This paper attempts to delve deeper into the very act of abjection that is vital in the discussion of the notion of subjectivity in the philosophy of Julia Kristeva. Rejection of what may seem strange to oneself is a common trait of every being and this rejection of what is radically different from oneself is what Kristeva calls as abjection. Abjection is one of the fundamental processes that gives way for the formation of self or the speaking being. The speaking being is the term used by Kristeva to denote a being who uses language and is constituted by the use of it. It is through this process of abjecting or rejecting, the self-identity of the speaking being is created. So, the very act of abjection becomes the basis for the formation of a self that is always in process. It can be said that for Kristeva is that which the symbolic always rejects or objects that threaten to wreck its abode. It is this act which collapses the settled meaning or a settled identity. Kristeva brings in her concept of abjection in the signifying process that results in the formation of the subjectivity. The signifying process is the process in language that leads to the formation of the speaking being. The signifying process of language have two modes of operation namely the symbolic and the semiotic. The Kristevian subject is constituted by the oscillation of the symbolic and semiotic. This oscillation from the symbolic to the semiotic is the signifying process that makes and unmakes the speaking beings. The Symbolic is the settled, orderly demarcated aspects of the speaking being while the semiotic is the ever changing, dynamic aspect which disrupts the orderly symbolic. Kristeva points out that the semiotic disruptions create the subjectivity of the speaking beings. These semiotic disruptions are caused by the act of abjection that is by rejecting the other or by rejecting what that lies beyond one's boundary. Kristeva finds the semiotic disruptions as a necessary precondition for the symbolic, settled order so for her, abjection of what lies beyond the boundaries becomes something inevitable in the formation of the speaking being.

Her work *Powers of Horror* gives a deeper understanding of the act of abjection upon which the subjectivity is built. According to Kristeva, our first experience is a realm of plenitude, of an oneness with our environment, and of the semiotic chora. Chora is a term that was coined by Plato in one of his works entitled *Timaeus*. Plato used the term chora to



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explain the origin of the universe. Chora is the container of the universe before it came into being. Kristeva explained chora as the stage that every person have before they develop clear borders of their personal identity. The infant comes into being without any borders and he is in the semiotic chora. The sense of unity in the infant soon changes as the infant begins to abject the other from 'I'. Thus, developing a clear border between itself and the other. The infant develops this border by the process of abjection, an act of rejection of that which is not a part of oneself.

Kristeva states that "Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk –harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire. Along with sight-clouding dizziness, nausea makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish myself." (Kristeva 1983, 3) From her examples of curdling milk, dung, vomit, and corpses she places abjection as a process of jettisoning that is a part of oneself. The abject is what one spits out, rejects, almost violently excludes from oneself; sour milk, excrement, even a mother's engulfing embrace. What is abjected is radically excluded but never removed altogether. It remains at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood. What makes something abject and not simply repressed is that it does not entirely disappear from consciousness. It remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one's own clean and proper self. The abject is what does not respect boundaries. It beseeches and pulverizes the subject.

The Abject Mother:

The first abject that the infant come across pulverizing and threatening itself is the mother itself. The boundaries of the self and the mother becomes the basis for anxiety for the child as this is the child's origin that is disrupted. As Kelly Oliver, a philosopher who has written extensively on Kristeva, writes: "The not-yet-subject with its not-yet, or no-longer, object maintains 'itself' as the abject. Abjection is a way of denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother, almost" (1993: 60). To become a subject, the child must renounce its identification with its mother, drawing a line between itself and her. But it is so difficult to identify her borders as s/he was once in her and now here s/he is outside her. The child is in a double-bind as s/he longs for the narcissistic union with its maternal and a need to renounce this union to become a subject. It must renounce a part of itself, but it is still one with the mother to become a self. That is somehow one must learn to live with this other that is in constant siege with the speaking being and even use this process of abjection to arrive at a stable 'I'. That is in Kristeva's words, "I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself..." (Kristeva,1982, 3). Kristeva sees this process as not a passing stage in a person's development, but as that which remains a companion through the whole of one's life as the abject comes back in fleeting encounters, fleeting because one runs, horrified of falling back into the Maternal body, where no difference and thus no subjectivity is possible. The abject perpetuates the bounds of oneself with the threat of a reality that if one acknowledges it will destroy the current one. Kristeva writes that abjection arises "With a "massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either" (Kristeva, 1982, 2).

Uncanniness as a sensation has been talked about by both Heidegger and Freud. Uncanniness means a radical strangeness that arises that disturbs the ego and extends an uncomfortable sensation. A feeling that unsettles the ego and is recurring. It is the feeling of dread, the fear of breaking the boundary that could topple the settled orderly symbolic. The state of mind of one experiencing abjection has its parallel in Heidegger's description of the state of encountering the nothing. Both the nothing and the abject presents an eternity of threatening and redrawing of one's own borders. The abject for Kristeva is that which induces violence to the subject as the borders are dissolved and resolved by the abject. Only my encountering the abject one can fathom its own being, so in a way the speaking being is drawn towards this toppling aspect as much as it hopes to run away from it. Foreigner is again an aspect of abject, where the notion of



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abjection in Kristeva becomes a more political and ethical basis than just an act that threatens a particular speaking being. According to Kristeva, encountering the foreigner, the native recalls her own incompleteness; she becomes anxious. The body that becomes anxious is both the personal body of the Native and the political body of the nation. The foreigner threatens the borders of the symbolic-and national-order.

Strangers to Ourselves:

Kristeva’s Strangers to Ourselves explores our feelings of estrangement towards ourselves and foreigners. While discussing abjection Kristeva is not talking about xenophobia but is talking about anxiety which is not the fear of strangers but uneasiness that arise about a probable possibility that one does not know of. This anxiety about the unknown creates a feeling of foreignness or strangeness within us. Kristeva discuss this foreignness that resides inside everyone. The foreigner that threatens the identity of one’s own. She says that every person is a foreigner to oneself. Kristeva in her work gives a definition of the foreigner: ‘the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder.’ (Kristeva, 1991). The ‘foreigner’ is something hidden in us, something with the potential to destroy ‘home’ and something that is beyond ‘understanding’ or relations with each other. It interrogates the subject’s identity; it challenges the notion of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’, and it reaches towards the unspeakable, silence and the unsaid. The strangeness or the foreignness is excluded as it results in a loss of set identity or the symbolic. But even if one excludes or abject the foreignness within oneself, they become united with the other as all people are foreigners to themselves and to each other.

Conclusion

Kristeva describes abjection as the process by which an infant emerges from the undifferentiated union it has with its mother and surroundings. It does this by expelling, physically and mentally, what is not part of its proper self. In this way, the infant begins to develop a sense of a discrete “I” even before the mirror stage of development and before learning language. But what the child abject is not gone once and for all. The abject continues to haunt the subject’s consciousness, remaining on the periphery of awareness. The subject finds the abject both repellent and seductive and thus his or her borders of self are, paradoxically, continuously threatened and maintained. They are threatened because the abject is alluring enough to crumble the borders of self; they are maintained because the fear of such a collapse keeps the subject vigilant. Hence the foreignness within and the encounter of a foreignness pulverizes and threaten the subject is anxiously looked upon by the speaking being in the process of reaching at a certain and stable identity. This again is under the threat of redefinition as I always exclude the stranger within and the only stable identity that everyone have is of a stranger or a foreigner who is in search for home. The speaking being from the moment they realise their distinction from the mother hopes to go back to that stability, to that time of plenitude, it is this desire to reach at that settled stable speaking being that drives to reach out to the strangeness even if it could be threatening. Throughout the discussion, the concept of abjection that the presence of an abject, that is uncanny and that which makes the speaking being anxious is not an abyss, but it presents us an opportunity, a thriving possibility that constantly process the speaking being in making. Abjection facilitates the formation of speaking being in an open system of infinite possibilities and encounters without an end or completion.

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