THE TRIUMPH OF THE ABJECT: A KRISTEVAN ANALYSIS OF BORA CHUNG'S "THE HEAD"

ZELİLİN ZAFERİ: BORA CHUNG'IN "KAFA" ÖYKÜSÜNÜN KRİSTEVA'NIN PSİKANALİTİK KURAMI İLE ANALİZİ

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Abstract

This study aims to explore South Korean writer Bora Chung's "The Head" from the writer's short story collection Cursed Bunny (2021) through the lens of Julia Kristeva's notion of "the abject". Haunting readers with its creepy image of a talking head made up of the nameless female protagonist's bodily waste, "The Head" forces them to ponder on the notion of the abject and the competency of the symbolic order to repress or exclude it, or the lack thereof as represented in Chung's story. "The Head" strikingly reflects the gradual process of the disintegration of the female protagonist's sense of self and unity when the head as the abject becomes an inseparable part of her life. Despite the woman's efforts to get rid of the head and thus maintain the symbolic order, the head's growing influence on the woman's life as a threatening force on her identity to the point of replacing her in the end hints at the inescapable presence of the abject. By applying Julia Kristeva's notion of "the abject", this study will focus on the abject as an integral component of the human psyche and the failure of the symbolic laws and rules to ward off and purify the abject as represented in Chung's "The Head". Through a Kristevan analysis of the story, it will be concluded that the semiotic realm as symbolized by what could be called "the triumph of the abject" in the story eventually prevails over the symbolic order by transgressing the boundaries between self/other, inside/outside and cleanliness/defilement and thus making us realize the tenuousness and vulnerability of these borders.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Güney Koreli yazar Bora Chung'ın Lanetli Tavşan (2021) adlı öykü derlemesinden "Kafa" öyküsünü Julia Kristeva'nın "zelil/iğrenç" kavramını esas alarak incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. İsimsiz bir kadın başkahramanın vücut atıklarından oluşan ve konuşabilen tüyler ürpertici bir kafa imgesiyle okuyuculara musallat olan "Kafa" öyküsü, onları zelil kavramı ve sembolik düzenin zelili bastırma ve dışarda tutma yeterliği ya da Chung'ın öyküsünde temsil edildiği şekliyle yetersizliği üzerine kafa yormaları için zorlamaktadır. Chung'ın öyküsü, zelil konumundaki kafanın kadın başkahramanın hayatının ayrılmaz bir parçası oldukça kadının kendilik ve bütünlük algısının giderek parçalanmasını çarpıcı bir şekilde yansıtmaktadır. Kadının kafadan kurtulmak ve sembolik düzeni sürdürmek için gösterdiği tüm çabalara rağmen, kafanın kadının kimliği üzerinde tehditkâr bir güce ulaşarak en sonunda kadının yerine geçmesi, zelilin kaçınılmaz varlığına işaret etmektedir. Bu çalışma, Julia Kristeva'nın "zelil" kavramı üzerinden Chung'ın öyküsünde temsil edildiği şekliyle zelilin insan benliğine olan içkinliğine ve sembolik yasa ve kuralların zelili dışlama ve arındırmadaki başarısızlığına odaklanacaktır. Kristeva'nın psikanalitik kuramı ekseninde incelenen bu öykü aracılığıyla, öyküde "zelilin zaferi" olarak adlandırılabilecek durumla sembolize edilen semiyotik alanın kendi/öteki, içeri/dışarı, temizlik/kirlilik sınırlarını aşarak en sonunda simgesel düzene galip geldiği sonucuna ulaşılacak ve böylelikle bu sınırların dayanıksızlığını ve kırılganlığını fark etmemiz mümkün olacaktır.

Introduction

Born in Seoul in 1976, Bora Chung is a South Korean novelist and translator (*Bora Chung*, n.d.). Having published three novels and three collections of short stories, Chung has gained international recognition with her short story collection and first translated work *Cursed Bunny*. Translated into English by Anton Hur, Chung's *Cursed Bunny* was published by Honford Star in 2021 and became the first Korean work of speculative fiction to be nominated for the International Booker Prize in 2022 (*Cursed Bunny*, n.d.). Drawing upon Korean folk tales, myths and legends along with Chung's expertise and studies in Slavic literature, *Cursed Bunny* is an amalgamation of fable, science fiction, fantasy and horror (Berlatsky, 2022). Containing ten short stories ranging from dark revenge fables to bizarre stories of body horror, Chung's *Cursed Bunny* features fantastical elements in an attempt "to address the horrors and cruelties of patriarchy and capitalism in modern society" (*Discover*, n.d.). Among these compelling stories, the title story of the collection recounts a series of unfortunate events caused by a bewitched fetish, the cursed bunny, leading to the downfall of everyone who touches it and explores the themes of capitalist greed and unrelenting and destructive desire for revenge. The second story of the collection, "The Embodiment", on the other hand, tells the story of a woman who gets pregnant as a ridiculously weird side effect of taking contraception pills for a long period of time. Forced to find a father for her baby or face catastrophic consequences, the woman in the story becomes the embodiment of the absurdity of societal norms and expectations imposed on women by patriarchy. With her nameless characters who are addressed with the titles such as "the man", "the woman", and "the daughter" in the stories of the collection, Chung hints at the universality of the complexities and challenges of existing in contemporary society and offers an insight into the evilness, injustices and different forms of oppression that have come to be a part of our daily lives in the modern world.

Appearing as the first story of Chung's *Cursed Bunny*, "The Head" perfectly exemplifies the author's thought-provoking and distinct style that compels readers to face the dread and strangeness of everyday life through her unique blend of the elements of fantasy, magical realism and horror. Consisting of 17 pages, "The Head" manages to both horrify and immerse readers in its story of a woman who is confronted by a strange creature that lives in her toilet and is made up of her bodily waste. Calling itself "the head" and the woman its "mother", the creature asks the woman to keep dumping her bodily waste so that it can achieve its aim of completing

its body. The story recounts the woman's endless struggles to dispose of the head while the head remains a constant and disturbing source of threat for her. The head, which has grown into a beautiful and young version of the woman over the decades, ultimately claims to take her place by shoving her into the toilet from which it has originally emerged.

"The Head" not only haunts readers with its creepy image of a talking head made up of the female protagonist's bodily waste but also makes them ponder on the notion of the abject and the competency of the symbolic order to repress or exclude it, or the lack thereof as represented in Chung's story. By featuring the disembodied bodily waste, referred to as the head in the story, as a central character, Chung's "The Head" successfully disrupts our sense of normalcy and forces us to confront the abject, hence the fallibility of the boundaries established for the integration of the subject into the symbolic order through the lens of Kristevan theory of psychoanalytic development. Chung's story takes a nameless woman into the centre of its narrative and strikingly reflects the gradual process of the disintegration of the woman's sense of self and unity when the head as the abject becomes an inseparable part of her life. Despite the woman's efforts to get rid of the head and thus maintain the symbolic order, the head's growing influence on the woman's life as a threatening force on her identity to the point of replacing her in the end hints at the inescapable presence of the abject and "*the fragility of the law*" in Kristeva's words (1982, p. 4). By applying Julia Kristeva's notion of "the abject", this study will focus on the abject as an integral component of the human psyche and the failure of the symbolic laws and rules to ward off and purify the abject as represented in Chung's "The Head". Through a Kristevan analysis of the story, it will be concluded that the semiotic realm as symbolized by what could be called "the triumph of the abject" in the story eventually prevails over the symbolic order by transgressing the boundaries between self/other, inside/outside and cleanliness/defilement and thus making us realize the tenuousness and vulnerability of these borders.

Theoretical Background: The Roots and Characteristics of the Abject

Kristeva's theory of subject development is central to our understanding of "the abject" since abjection is traced back to the early stages of the subject's psychosexual development and is fundamental to the formation of the subject's subjectivity and maturation. While building upon Lacan's model of psychosexual development, Kristeva differs from him particularly with her emphasis on the centrality of the feminine and maternal in the psychosexual development of the subject (Becker-

Leckrone, 2005, p. 27). In Lacanian psychoanalysis, through the three stages, which he names the real, the imaginary and the symbolic, the subject's psychosexual development is completed. During the real stage, experiencing a complete unity with his/her mother, the child does not have an understanding of him/herself as a separate being (1988a, p. 82). The imaginary stage starts with the mirror stage when the child misrecognizes him/herself as a separate entity from his/her mother although s/he is completely dependent on her (1949/1977, p. 2). During the real and imaginary stages, the child does not need to use language, since s/he does not experience any lack or absence. For Lacan, language is "*by nature symbol of only of an absence*" (1988b, p. 39). During the symbolic stage, which is characterized by the acquisition of language, the child is not only introduced to language but also is subjected to a set of rules and prohibitions; as a result, s/he becomes a part of the society and culture as a speaking subject (1957/1977, p. 112).

Different from Lacan, Kristeva proposes the term of "the semiotic" as the stage that is central to the emergence of the self and "*not reducible to Lacan's categories of the imaginary or the real– which precedes and exceeds the workings of the mirror stage*" (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 28). "*Pre-symbolic*" and "*pre-language*", this stage is marked by a multiplicity of drives, "*whether life drives or death drives*", which echoes Freudian drive theory positing the sexual and aggressive drives as the two main instincts of the human psyche (Freud, 1940/2000, p. 4959; Kristeva, 1982, p. 14). During this stage, the child and the mother are in a symbiotic relationship characterized by "*bodily interdependence, shared smiles, crying, and the abstract rhythms, sounds*" (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 27). During this stage, the mother takes care of all the needs of the child and provides him/her with absolute emotional and bodily satisfaction; accordingly, the child experiences completeness and perfect harmony with his/her mother.

During the semiotic stage, a "*strange space*", what Kristeva calls "*the semiotic chora*", which is also central to the concept of the abject, is created (1982, p. 14). Borrowing the term from Plato's *Timaeus*, Kristeva defines chora as "*nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated*" (1984, p. 26). The chora as a "*receptacle*" is "*nourishing and maternal*" (1984, p. 26). Being the locus of the drives and not ordered by the symbolic law, the chora is pre-symbolic and is "*analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm*" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). Having no "*thesis*" or "*position*", the chora is an unrepresentable and not unified entity as Kristeva proposes (1984, p. 26):

> The chora is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e., it is not a sign); nor is it a position that represents someone for another position (i.e., it is not yet a signifier either); it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position (1984, p. 26).

While the semiotic chora precedes and transcends language, it is also the source of all the signifying processes of language. The operations of the semiotic chora can be found in the child's preverbal sounds, laughter, gestures and rhythms (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). Deprived of unity and structure of the symbolic order, the chora is, therefore, "*a modality of signifiance in which the linguistic sign is not yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the distinction between real and symbolic*" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). However, the chora is also subject to "*an objective ordering which is dictated by natural or socio-historical constraints such as the biological difference between the sexes or family structure*" (Kristeva, 1984, p. 26). Namely, the chora is both the space on which the child's complete unity and connection to the maternal body is oriented and also the site from which language acquisition and integration to the symbolic order will be attained for the subject.

This "*rhythmic space*" of the semiotic chora that places it in-betweenness of the semiotic and the symbolic is also what posits the subject as "*the subject in process/on trial*" in Kristeva's words (1984, p. 22). That is to say, organized by the maternal body, the semiotic chora becomes "*the 'place' where the subject will become*" (Keltner, 2011, p. 30). It is during the semiotic stage which is "*anterior to the 'mirror stage'*", the child moves away from the mother by expelling/rejecting her and moves onto the symbolic realm (Kristeva, 1980, p. 134).

Moreover, within the semiotic, "*which consist in fundamentally unstable drives and impulses inscribed across and circulating throughout the child's body in an untrammelled way*", there are pivotal moments that organize the semiotic into unity and structure, namely, into the symbolic (Grosz, 1989, p. 45). Kristeva calls this "*threshold between the semiotic and the symbolic*" 'the thetic' and defines it as "*an anticipation of the symbolic from within the semiotic, as well as the residues of the semiotic in the symbolic*" (Grosz, 1989, p. 45). Kristeva maintains that "*the thetic phase of the signifying process, around which signification is organized at two points: the mirror stage and the 'discovery of castration'*" (1984, p. 47). The mirror stage in which the child's first "*holophrastic utterances*" occur prepares the child for language learning that acutely separates the child from the semiotic chora (Kristeva, 1984, p. 47). The threat of castration, on the other hand, is what severs the child from his/her

dependence on the maternal body and introduces the law of the father and "*prohibition placed on maternal body*" known as the incest taboo (Kristeva, 1982, p. 14).

For the child to be able to form his/her subjectivity and to be integrated into the symbolic order through these developmental processes, s/he must abject the mother, which renders the mother as the 'first abject'. In other words, as Kristeva underlines, abjection must be traced back to "*our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity*" (1982, p. 13). Originating from the semiotic realm and the position of the mother as the first abject, the abject, thus, signifies the centrality of the maternal body in the process of the subject's emerging self. For Kristeva, "*abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be*" (1982, p. 10). To put it simply, it is through the abjection of the mother the subject can construct his/her subjectivity and identity in order to be a part of the symbolic order.

In her well-known work *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) in which she sets out to explore the concept of "the abject", Kristeva describes the abject as an enigmatic force that falls outside the established categories or distinctions: "*There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable*" (p. 1). Abjection, hence, refers to the collapse of the boundaries between subject and object, threatening one's sense of self due to its uncategorizable and inexplicable quality. For Kristeva, "*the abject*", namely, "*the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses*" (1982, p. 2). To clarify, abjection arises when the distinction between subject and object is blurred, causing the subject to go through a "*crisis*" that both "*generates and negates*" him/her (Kristeva, 1984, p. 28). The abject "*generates*" the subject since it is through the abjection of the mother the subject is able to form its identity and subjectivity. However, it is also what destabilizes, in other words, "*negates*" the subject by threatening the borders between self and other. That is why, the abject "*lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Being an integral part of one's existence and psyche, the subject is never able to repress or exclude the abject.

The abject is essentially what repels and disgusts the subject, including bodily fluids, waste, defilement, sewage, and filth by threatening the boundaries between inside/outside, self/other, and subject/object. To exemplify, "*urine, blood, sperm,*

excrement" as bodily liquids and waste are the forms of the abject since they show the subject that it is "*lacking its own and clean self*", and thus breach the boundary between inside and outside (Kristeva, 1982, p. 53). The abject leads to the feelings of repugnance in a person because of the fact that although it is not a part of the subject/body anymore, it cannot be thought as separated from the subject/body that produces it (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 2-3). For Kristeva, "*the corpse, seen without God and outside of science*" is the ultimate form of abjection (1982, p. 4). The corpse, which Kristeva defines as "*death infecting life*", is what immensely disrupts the boundary between life and death, causing "*my entire body [to fall] beyond the limit*" (1982, p. 3). At the sight of a corpse, the subject cannot separate him/herself from what s/he extricates: "*The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled*" (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 3-4). Reminded of his/her own mortality and vulnerability of the boundary between life and death, the subject is appalled by the sight of a corpse due to its erasure of the border that keeps the once-living-subject from the non-living object that it has transformed into.

Consequently, the abject which belongs to the semiotic realm and maternal authority is in opposition to and conflict with the symbolic order. Positioned in a "*binary logic*", maternal authority in the semiotic realm maps "*the self's clean and proper body*" and "*is distinguished from paternal laws*", whereas symbolic order that functions to separate the subject from the semiotic realm "*does so precisely by repressing maternal authority and the corporeal mapping that abuts against them*" through certain rules, laws, codes and rituals (Kristeva, 1982, p. 72). However, the abject which is "*the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4) always reminds us of the semiotic realm and thus upsets the boundaries constructed by the symbolic order in an effort to control and purify the abject.

All in all, the abject as the fundamental concept of Kristeva's theory of subject development essentially signifies the distinction between the semiotic realm and the symbolic order. Through the abjection of the mother as the first abject, the subject breaks away from the semiotic and steps into the symbolic order and constructs his/her subjectivity and identity. However, the abject that disturbs the borders and boundaries between self/other, inside/outside and subject/object within the symbolic order cannot be totally eliminated. The concept of the abject, therefore, will function as a useful medium to unveil the inescapable presence of the abject in one's

psyche and the frailty of the symbolic rules and laws in the face of the abject within the context of Chung's "The Head".

The Head in Chung's Story: The Abject That Destabilizes and Prevails

Chung's "The Head" starts with the shocking appearance of "*a head popping out of the toilet*" that calls the unnamed female protagonist "*mother*" (2021, p. 5). The woman immediately flushes the toilet to get rid of it but the head reappears in the woman's bathroom a few days later and keeps calling her "*mother*" (Chung, 2021, p. 5). From the very beginning of the story, we are introduced to the realm of the abject in that we are faced with an abject being, namely, a sentient and speaking disembodied head made of the protagonist's bodily waste. Moreover, by calling the woman "mother", the head reveals its connection to the maternal body, since "*if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 73). In other words, "*everything that is filthy or disorderly or uncivilized is in the same 'place' as the left-behind mother, in the realm of the abject*" (Covino, 2004, p. 21). The detailed description of the head holds the potential to arouse feelings of repulsion as expected from the abject:

> It was probably more accurate to refer to it as "a thing that vaguely looked like a head" than an actual head. It was about two-thirds the size of an adult's head and resembled a lump of carelessly slapped-together yellow and grey clay, with a few scattered clumps of wet hair. No ears, no eyebrows. Two slits for eyes so narrow that she couldn't tell if its eyes were open or closed. The crushed mound beneath was meant to be its nose. The mouth was also a lipless slit […], its strained speech mixed with the gurgling of a person drowning, making it difficult to understand (Chung, 2021, p. 5).

Essentially made up of the bodily waste of the protagonist, more specifically her excrement and hairs, this curious thing functions as the embodiment of the abject in the story. This bulk of bodily waste points to "*the collapse of the border between inside and outside. It is as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean self'*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 53). Although the head is now separated from the woman and exists on its own, it has been originated from the woman, which disrupts the distinction between the clean and ordered body of the woman and the filth that her body excretes. The excremental head as the abject being, thus, signifies "*a crisis in which the borders of self and other radically break down*" for the woman in the story (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 151).

Moreover, Chung's employment of defamiliarization by forming a parallelism between this bulk of bodily waste and a human head through the description of the head with human-like qualities becomes effective for "*the subject/object opposition*" to be "*subverted, collapsed, and assimilated*" (Davis, 1995, p. 9). Disturbing the boundary between human/ nonhuman and self/other, the head as the abject evokes "*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*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). To clarify, the familiarity of the head through its similarity to a human head is accompanied by its alienness and loathsomeness as waste that is excreted and separated from a human's body. Collapsing the boundaries between the head as the object and the subject that produces it, the head reinforces its position as the abject. Besides, the depiction of the excremental waste, which is something repulsive that people would normally exclude from themselves through elimination and sanitization, as a human-like creature that has eyes, a nose, and a mouth in the story could function to defamiliarize readers and therefore force them to face with the integrality of the abject to our psyche and existence.

Giving examples from some great writers from the history of literature such as "*Dostoyevsky, Lautreamont, Proust, Artaud, Kafka, Celine*", Kristeva underlines that literature could be a great medium of "*retracing the fragile limits of the speaking being, closest to its dawn, to the bottomless* '*primacy*' *constituted by primal repression*" (1982, p.18). That is to say, literature could provide the chance for readers to confront what is "*inseparable, contaminated, condemned, at the boundary of what is assimilable, thinkable: abject*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 18). As a result, the "'*necessary and absurd seeming' of religion, morality, and law as systems of representation*", hence, the constructedness and fragility of these systems could be perceived through literature (Beardsworth, 2004, p. 142). Viewed in this context, it could be said that by means of "*unveiling of the abject*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 208), Chung's "The Head" invites readers to question the laws and limitations within the symbolic order that aim to control the subject through the repression and exclusion of the abject.

In Chung's story, the ambiguity of the abject as one of its basic qualities that "*simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject"* is displayed by the first dialogue between the head and the woman (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). On their second encounter, the woman agrees to talk to the head, which begs to be heard. Intrigued and agitated by the appearance of this peculiar entity in her bathroom, the woman asks the head why it is in her toilet and why it is calling her "*Mother*" (Chung, 2021,

p. 6). The head answers, saying, "*My body was created with the things you dumped down the toilet, like your fallen-out hair and feces and toilet paper you used to wipe your behind*" (Chung, 2021, p. 6). Upon hearing this, the woman who is shaken by the experience of facing with the abject gets angry and says: "*I never gave the likes of you any permission to live in my toilet. I never even created you in the first place, so stop calling me your 'mommy'*" (Chung, 2021, p. 6). It is clear that the woman is both engrossed and disgusted by the head in the sense that the abject is "*as tempting as it is condemned*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). It is also established that the woman's body is the maternal body out of which the head, namely, the abject is formed. The significance of the woman's body for the head is further emphasized by what the head requests from the woman: "*I'm only asking that you keep dumping your body waste in the toilet so I can finish creating the rest of my body*" (Chung, 2021, p. 6). This showcases that the head and the woman are inseparably interconnected: while the excremental head's whole existence depends on the woman's body, the woman needs to keep excreting her bodily waste due to her condition as a living being that can only survive by means of extricating what must be expelled from her body. Besides, the head's wish to complete its body with the bodily waste the woman produces hints at its constant existence and ever-growing influence on the woman's life. The head which will haunt the woman throughout the course of the story despite the woman's efforts to get rid of it, thus, exemplifies the impossibility of the complete exclusion of the abject from one's psyche, since, as Kristeva points out, the abject "*is something rejected from which one does not part*" (1982, p. 4).

In the story, the position of the woman as the maternal body that relates her to the abject is also strengthened by the fact that the head is not only made up of her excremental waste but also of her menstrual blood, both of which, for Kristeva, stem from "*the maternal and/or feminine, of which the maternal is the real support*" (1982, p. 71). These "*two defilements*" are the elements representative of the mother that needs to be excluded by the child, since "*the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71; 1992, p. 27). What makes excrement maternal is that "*it is pre-symbolic basis of one's own/clean body*" (Lechte, 1990, p. 163). Excrement functions to "*mark out*" the body as "*clean, proper and one's own*" while being "*pre-linguistically under the 'semiotic authority' of the mother*" (Lechte, 1990, p. 163). For Kristeva, this semiotic authority "*shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper*—clean and improper—*dirty, possible and impossible, is*

impressed and exerted" (1982, p. 72). As a result, the relationship established between the excremental head and the woman as its mother in the story highlights that excrement is the abject that not only disrupts the boundaries of the proper and clean body as "*the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side, a margin*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 69) but also represents the original abjection—the abjection of the mother—for the child to enter into the symbolic and societal order.

Similar to excrement, menstrual blood is also maternal, since it "*stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71). The mother's position "*as a threat to boundaries*" is reinforced by the menstrual blood as a form of defilement that "*render[s] the boundary of the body indistinct and ambiguous*" (Lechte, 1990, p. 163). In Chung's story, in one of many instances where the woman sees the head in her toilet, she realizes that "*the mashed-up face underneath the irregular clumps of hair would've normally been yellow and gray, but it was oddly red. The woman remembered she was having her period*" (Chung, 2021, p. 7). When the woman asks the head if this change of colour in it has "*anything to do with the state of [her] own body",* the head answers, saying, "*Mother, the state of your body has a direct effect on my appearance. This is because my entire existence depends on you*" (Chung, 2021, p. 7). The woman is both positioned as the subject that generates menstrual blood and is connected to the figure of the archaic mother as the first abject that the child expels and separates from him/herself to become autonomous. Made up of two forms of defilement that are maternal, namely, excremental and menstrual, the head, thus, becomes "*analogous to the mother who is both the object of waste and, with her menstrual blood, its distinctive source*" (Covino, 2004, p. 22).

The woman's confrontation with the abject as a threat to the unity and borders of her body and self becomes an unsettling experience for her. She attempts to deal with the crisis of confronting the abject by denying that she is responsible for the creation of the head and threatening to "*call the exterminators*" to annihilate it (Chung, 2021, p. 6). It is clear that the woman feels threatened by the existence of the abject as it exposes her sense of unified identity and ordered body which are determined by the pre-set rules of the symbolic order to the risk of disintegration. Accordingly, the woman's anger and unwillingness to accept that the head is something she created and her desire to get rid of it indicate the subject's repulsion at the sight of the abject, which Kristeva describes as the sense of "*repugnance*" that

"*turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck*" (1982, p. 2). Kristeva underlines that the subject who is alarmed by the abject tries to protect her/his sense of self from disintegrating through developing feelings of repulsion and some physical reactions like vomiting: "*Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. The spasms and vomiting that protect me*" (1982, p. 2). It is also seen that the woman's feelings of disgust in the face of the abject take physical form in her act of vomiting in the story: "[…] *she vomited into the sink. She vomited for a long time* […]" (Chung, 2021, p. 7). Due to the impossibility of categorizing or identifying the abject as it collapses the borders between subject and object, the feelings and physical manifestations of repugnance are crucial for the subject to protect his/her identity and borders to be able to continue to be a part of the cultural and societal rules and laws within the symbolic order. The woman's feelings of repulsion and her vomiting, therefore, perfectly epitomize her efforts to protect her identity and sense of unity in the face of the abject.

The woman's intentional blocking of the toilet is a crucial scene in Chung's story that serves to reveal how filth and defilement, especially menstrual blood, is "*subject to ritual acts whose purpose is to ward off defilement, and thus abjection*" (Lechte, 1990, p. 163). The woman seems to act on her initial threat of calling the exterminators by drowning the head with her pad in the toilet:

> […] The woman took off her underwear and sanitary pad. She stuck the pad smeared with her menstrual blood on the head's face and shoved it down the toilet. She flushed. The head and the pad swirled around the bowl and vanished into the dark hole […] The toilet got clogged. The plumber presented the sanitary pad to her as if it were a trophy and delivered a long lecture about not throwing such things into the toilet (Chung, 2021, p. 7).

Her impulsive act of blocking the toilet in order to get help from an outside resource could be perceived as her reliance on the symbolic order in driving away the abject. For Kristeva, "*abjection, just like prohibition of incest, is a universal phenomenon*"; however, "*it assumes specific shapes and different codings according to the various 'symbolic systems'*" (1982, p. 68). These acts of exclusion that take various forms in different cultures and systems are practiced through "*the rituals of defilement and their derivates*" and function to fend off the abject (1982, p. 64). It is through these rituals the subject is separated from the semiotic realm of the archaic mother and the borders of the symbolic order are secured. In the story, the plumber's "heroic" act of unclogging the toilet by removing the woman's pad like "*a trophy*" could

be interpreted as a metaphorical purification of the defilement caused by the woman's pad polluted by her menstrual blood. To clarify, the plumber's act of unblocking the toilet through the elimination of the pad with menstrual blood could be viewed as a form of "*rituals tied to cleanliness*" (Lechte, 1990, p. 159) against the abject, which aim to separate the subject from the semiotic authority and position him/her in the ordered realm of the symbolic. Moreover, the plumber's warning the woman against "*not throwing such things into the toilet*" referring to the woman's pad with a patronizing attitude could display how "*ritualization of defilement is accompanied by a strong concern for separating the sexes and this means giving men rights over women*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 70). In brief, the plumber as a patriarchal figure in the story functions as a medium to secure the rules and laws of the symbolic realm both through warding off the menstrual blood as the abject and by using it as a reminder of the differentiation between sexes, hence, the authority of men over women.

It is also striking that when the woman mentions the head first to her family in her parental home and then to her husband when she gets married and moves in with her husband later on in the story, they just ignore it by reacting to this gruesome entity in exactly the same way. Her family indifferently say, "*It's not like it's laying eggs or anything. Why don't you just leave it alone?"* (Chung, 2021, p. 8). Similarly, her husband is quite inattentive to the existence of a talking fecal head in their house: "*Eh, that's nothing. Just leave it alone. It's not like it crawls out of there at night and lays eggs around the house*" (Chung, 2021, p. 13). It deserves attention that the reason why neither the family nor the husband of the woman is concerned about the head comes down to the fact that it does not "lay eggs". Indicative of reproductive capacity, laying eggs means "*producing eggs that develop and hatch outside the maternal body*" as a reproduction strategy mostly seen in "*amphibians, birds, fish and reptiles*" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.; biology dictionary, n.d.). Kristeva makes it clear that the abject and the rituals of defilement as a way to purify it stem from "*the fear of the archaic mother*", which "*turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power*" (1982, p. 77). Kristeva further explains that "*it is thus not surprising to see pollution rituals proliferating in societies where patrilineal power is poorly secured, as if the latter sought, by means of purification, a support against excessive matrilineality*" (1982, p. 77). That is to say, the patriarchal authority within the symbolic order is mainly maintained and secured through the repression of the mother and her generative power by excluding the abject. Viewed in this perspective, lacking reproductive potential, hence, generative power, the head in the story is considered "safe" by the woman's family and husband who do not feel threatened or alarmed by its existence.

The woman, on the other hand, is in a constant state of terror and uneasiness because of the ubiquitous existence of the head. She keeps seeing it in the bathroom of her house and when the head appears in the bathroom of her workplace for the first time, she "*quit[s] her job the next day*" (Chung, 2021, p. 8). Her health is also severely affected because "*the thought of something lurking below where she did her business, waiting to eat her defecations, made going to any bathroom unbearable*", which eventually causes her to develop "*constipation*" and have "*inflammation*" in her bladder (Chung, 2021, p. 8) The woman is clearly perturbed by the abject, which is not easy to fathom, for it is "*not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. "A "something" that I do not recognize as a thing*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). It is this ambivalent quality of the abject that has a disconcerting impact on the woman, leading to "*[a] weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of nonexistence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). To put it simply, haunted by the head, the woman has a hard time making sense of its existence and reality. That is why, in the beginning, she seems to think that she can keep the head under control as she starts "*to keep her toilet lid closed*" and "*whenever she [is] doing her business, she develop[s] the habit of frequently looking into the bowl*" (Chung, 2021, p. 7). However, she is made to realize that the head appears on its own terms by defeating all the measures she has taken against it:

> One day, just as she was about to close the toilet lid, she caught a glimpse of the head peering out of the hole. She slammed down the lid. She flushed several times. Just as she was about to leave the bathroom, she carefully cracked open the lid. Her eyes met those of the head. It was staring at her from the water. Its hair floated around its face. She shut the lid again. She tried to flush but the water wouldn't go down (Chung, 2021, p. 8).

Reminding the woman of the futility of her efforts to control or avoid it, the head as the abject displays its persistent and uncontrollable existence for the subject.

Going through a period of "*dreary crisis*" due to her confrontation with the abject, the woman is recommended by her family to "*find a husband*" (Chung, 2021, p. 8; Kristeva, 1982, p. 208). It is obvious that the abject is attempted to be "*supplanted by the symbolic world which involves turning toward"* social conventions, codes of conduct, rules and regulations (Covino, 2004, p. 21). It could be deduced that marriage as a powerful and regulating social institution is positioned as a way to counteract the disquieting experience of encountering the abject, which belongs to

the semiotic realm and maternal authority. Marriage as a "*socio-symbolic unit*" regulates the "*sexual difference*", which signifies the hierarchical power relations between men and women (Kristeva, 1982, p. 79, 83). The sexual difference between the two sexes, "*the masculine, apparently victorious*" and "*the feminine*" that "*is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power*", within the marriage institution guarantees the dominance and control of men over women in the symbolic order (Kristeva, 1982, p. 70).

In the hope of finding a husband, the woman goes on a date with a man "*set up by a matchmaker recommended by her mother*" (Chung, 2021, p. 8). The man says that his dream is "*to marry a nice woman, have children, and live happily ever after*" (Chung, 2021, p. 8). This showcases the patriarchal and social expectations for a man to marry a suitable woman who could provide him with comfort, sexual satisfaction as well as posterity. The woman finds the man "*unimaginative*" as he simply acts as the spokesman of the established patterns of gender roles within the marriage (Chung, 2021, p. 8). The man, however, is attracted to the woman because of her qualities that he deems not easy to find in a woman in today's world:

> Sitting before this strange man, she couldn't help being nervous about the bathroom situation. The man misconstrued her distracted fidgeting. He said, "My ideal woman is shy and demure. It is hard to find a girl like you who's shy in front of a man these days." The man was so enamored and enthusiastic about the match that they were engaged three months later and wedded in another three (Chung, 2021, pp. 8-9).

Having internalized "*the cultural construction*" of feminine virtues such as "*passivity", "docility"*, and "*ineffectuality*" (Millett, 2000, p. 26; Butler, 2002, p. 11) within the patriarchal symbolic order, the man explicitly states his desire to have this "*shy and demure*" woman as his wife by expressing his discontent with contemporary women who, according to him, do not fit these desired feminine qualities.

Compelled to carry out all the traditional roles expected of her as a woman within the patriarchal symbolic system, the woman gets married, becomes a mother by giving birth to her daughter and does all the chores of a housewife, such as "*cooking for her husband and child, washing the dishes, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, shopping* […]" (Chung, 2021, p. 14). It is worthy of attention that during the period when the woman is adjusting to all these changes as a married woman, she does not see or think about the head as before. When she has a child, "*she*

[forgets] about the head completely" (Chung, 2021, p. 9). This highlights that it is through these socially and culturally accepted roles assigned to women as wives and mothers within the marriage, the threat of the abject based on the maternal body and semiotic authority can be repressed. Nevertheless, the head reappears one day while the woman is bathing her daughter in the bathroom of her new house. Startled, the woman asks the head, "*How is it that you have reappeared before me? Who told you where we were*?" and the head answers, "*Your defecations are a part of me, so I will always know where you are*." (Chung, 2021, p. 10). Evidently, "*like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion [which] places the one haunted by it literally beside himself*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1), the head keeps following the woman, indicating that the abject can never be completely excluded from one's existence. This aspect of the abject reinforces Kristeva's idea that the subject only separates him/herself from his/her mother with "*a violent, clumsy break away*" during his/her early years as the necessary condition of entering into the symbolic order "*with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 13). Thus, the mother is established as a force that will always exert her influence and power over the subject throughout his/her entire life.

At this point, it is crucial to realize the clash between the position of the woman as the mother to her daughter and to the head in Chung's story. In the bathroom scene in which they see each other again after a while, the head asks the woman, "*Mother, is that child your daughter*?" (Chung, 2021, p. 10). The following conversation shows the woman's feelings of anger and apprehension because of this question:

> […] I told you to go away, how dare you reappear calling me 'Mother'! It's none of your concern whose child this is! But fine, this is my child. She is the only one in this world who may call me 'Mother.' Now, be gone. I said, be gone!" […]
>
> The head said, "I may have been birthed a different way from that child, but I, too, am your creation, Mother (Chung, 2021, p. 10).

The woman adamantly situates herself as the "mother" to her daughter but not to the head. By embracing the role of the sacred motherhood in an attempt to drive the abject out, the woman tries to maintain and secure the patriarchal symbolic order in which "*the consecrated (religious or secular) representation of femininity is absorbed by motherhood*" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 161). However, as the head makes it clear, she is also the creator of this abject being, which cannot be totally brought under the control of the symbolic order. The weight of the head on the woman's unconscious and the

dividedness of her identity as the mother to both her daughter and the head is revealed in her nightmarish dream in the story. Dreaming that the head is "*popping out from everywhere*" in "*a white, tiled room*" where she is with her husband and daughter, the woman pulls the lever to flush the head; however, the water swirls around not only the head but also her husband and daughter (Chung, 2021, p. 13). In an attempt to save her daughter, the woman grabs her from the whirlpool of the dark hole; looking down at her child when "*a familiar voice*" calls her "*mother*", the woman sees that "*upon her daughter's little body and delicate neck sat the head*" (Chung, 2021, pp. 13-14). This condensed figure as the combination of the woman's child and the head in her dream could be interpreted in relation to Freudian term of "dream-condensation". According to Freudian dream theory, condensation is one of the fundamental processes of transforming the unconscious dream-thoughts into the manifest content of the dream by "*the ego's forces of defences*" in order to prevent the repressed ideas and wishes of the unconscious from entering consciousness (1900/2000, p. 781; 1910/2000, p. 2222). Freud points out that condensation operates in dreams through the fusion of "*two ideas in the dream-thoughts which have something in common, some point of contact*, [...] [*into*] *a composite idea*" (1901, p. 1073). Accordingly, the dreamed figure in the story functions as the "composite idea" in that having the woman as their creator/mother in common, the body of the child and the head of the abject being are "*fused into a single unity*" (Freud, 1916-17/2000, p. 3263).

As a form of distortion of the unconscious dream-thoughts, condensation is basically "*an act of censorship*" of the material "*belonging to the region of the repressed*" (Freud, 1900/2000, p. 653; 1922/2000, p. 3906). Therefore, the woman's dream in which the repressed abject resurfaces could manifest that on an unconscious level the woman actually views the head as something she created just as she created her daughter although she refuses to see herself as the mother of the head in her conscious life. Divided "*between semiotic authority and symbolic law*" with her position as the mother to her daughter and to the head, (Kristeva, 1982, p. 73), the woman feels the need to eliminate the abject and take shelter in her motherhood within the symbolic order. That is why, she is worried that the head would harm her daughter: "*Was the head jealous of her daughter? Would it bully the child? Just the thought of the child glimpsing the head was unbearable. She became nervous whenever the little one wanted to go to the bathroom*" (Chung, 2021, p. 10). In an effort to dispose of the head, she tries hard to secure both her sense of identity and her

daughter as a protective mother, a role which purifies and safeguards her in the face of the abject.

For this reason, as the story progresses, the woman resorts to more violent ways to discard the head. One time she plucks the head from the toilet, wraps it in a plastic bag and throws it away in a trash can outside; another time she tries to mummify it by putting it out on a sunny spot on the veranda in a small container (Chung, 2021, pp. 11-12). However, the head always finds its way back to the woman by convincing the janitor for the first time and the woman's husband for the second time to put it back in the toilet (Chung, 2021, pp. 12-13). It is clearly seen that the woman's desperate attempts to remove the head from her toilet over the years and hence maintain the symbolic order are repeatedly disrupted by this abject being, revealing that "*from its place of banishment, the abject does not stop challenging its master*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). The impossibility of eliminating the abject and its pervasive impact on the subject's life is also reinforced with the head's getting closer to its aim of completing its body throughout the course of the story. To illustrate, when the head reappears in her bathroom after disappearing only for some time, the woman realizes that it has become bigger and more human like during the time she has not seen it:

> The head's head had now grown to about the size of an average adult's. The yellow and gray mashed-up clay lump form was the same, but its eyes were a little bigger so she could now make out its blinking, and something that resembled lips was attached to its mouth. There were mounds of flesh for ears that looked like they'd been carelessly stuck on either side of its face, and beneath its barely discernable chin was a new band of flesh that seemed to be the beginnings of a neck (Chung, 2021, p. 9).

The head that appears to be gradually taking a distinct human form not only proves its determination to finish its body but also hints at the potential challenges for the woman to get rid of it as it will evidently keep getting bigger and stronger.

It is quite noticeable that the physical growth of the head coincides with the woman's growing dissatisfaction with her life as she ages. As years pass by, her husband gets busier with his job and her daughter grows into a young woman. Spending "*more and more time alone in the house*" (Chung, 2021, p. 16), the woman feels more and more trapped into the monotonous and meaningless cycle of her everyday life, which causes her to get depressed:

> […] On days her child or husband came home late, or even after her whole family had long fallen asleep, she would watch TV until the national anthem came on. Partly because she had nothing else to do, but more so because she thought if she concentrated hard enough on the screen, she might decrease an odd-feeling little space that had appeared in her heart. The space felt empty sometimes, full at others, and bitter or aching at still other times. This strange little space, if she ever let her guard down, could suddenly blow up in size and consume her […] (Chung, 2021, p. 16).

It could be commented that although the woman has attempted to take control of the abject through her roles as a wife and a mother in the patriarchal symbolic order, these roles have failed to provide her with a sense of unity or fulfilment in the face of the abject. The woman's feelings of disillusionment and despair could be interpreted in relation to Kristeva's definition of melancholy, and "*its more temporary variant, depression*" (Lechte, 1990, p.185) in her *Black Sun* (1992): "*[A]n abyss of sorrow, a noncommunicable grief that at times, and often on a long-term basis, lays claims upon us to the extent of having us lose all interest in words, actions, and even life itself*" (p. 3). This melancholic sadness, which Kristeva describes as "*the most archaic expression of an unsymbolizable, unnameable narcissistic wound*" stems from the fact that the child "*has been irrevocably, desperately separated from the mother*" (1992, pp. 12-16). In the light of Kristeva's understanding of melancholy, the depression of the woman in Chung's story who clearly cannot find solace in the symbolic order through her marriage and motherhood in order to overcome her archaic separation from her mother points to "*a primitive self—wounded, incomplete, empty*" in Kristeva's words (1992, p. 12).

Furthermore, as the woman gets older, she is also disillusioned by the signs of aging in her body, such as "*wrinkles and sagging in her skin, and rough patches where she had once been smooth*" (Chung, 2021, p. 15). Indicating her "*physical wasting and ultimate death*", the woman's aging body can be thought as "*the abject body*" (Covino, 2004, p. 17). Abjection related to old age derives from "*the evidence of absence, absence of self-consciousness, of self-control, of corporeal ownership-the abjection of the orphaned body*" (Gilleard & Higgs, 2011, p. 138). To illustrate, upon seeing her "*white hair picking out from the roots of her dye job*", the woman thinks that "*she'd need another hair appointment soon*" (Chung, 2021, p. 17). It could be deduced that the woman struggles to amend her abject body that "*disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety*" (Covino, 2004, p. 17) through a dye job

which would eliminate one of the symptoms of her aging and render her body ordered and socially acceptable.

The woman is reminded of her abject body especially when she compares it to her young daughter's body:

> [...] The woman rediscovered the contours of her younger face in the familiar-unfamiliar face of her daughter, feeling surprise, pride, love, and jealousy at the same time. When her child straight-permed her hair flat and dyed it purple, the woman stood before a mirror when no one was watching and fiddled with the curls of her "auntie perm," a tight cap of poodle-like hair that had to be dyed black (Chung, 2021, p. 16).

In contrast to her daughter's body which is glowing with beauty, health and youth, the woman's aging body is in the process of deterioration. Her perception of her young daughter's body as both "familiar" and "unfamiliar" points to the obscurity of boundaries between self and other as the prevalent quality of the abject. For Kristeva, pregnancy and motherhood blur the boundaries between self and other. Kristeva describes childbirth as "*a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides*" (1982, p. 101). Since "*maternity is the splitting, fusing, merging, fragmenting of a series of bodily processes outside the will or control of a subject*", this experience gives rise to abjection with the realization that "*the body is more than, in excess of, the 'clean and proper'*" (Grosz, 1989, p. 79, 77). Nonetheless, "*the child's arrival [...] extracts woman out of her oneness and gives her the possibility [...] of reaching out to the other*" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 182). In brief, although faced with the abject through childbirth, the mother learns to embrace and love what she gives birth to. Thus, in the story, the woman finds her daughter's body familiar and can see the resemblance between her daughter's body and hers as she is the creation of her own body. However, the daughter's flourishing body constitutes a direct opposite to her aging body, making her daughter's young and beautiful body unfamiliar. It is these "*tenuous bodily boundaries*" (Grosz, 1989, p. 78) between self and other that render the motherhood an abject experience as observed in the woman's ambivalent feelings towards her daughter in Chung's story.

Consequently, the woman's disintegration induced by her unsatisfactory life within the confines of the patriarchal symbolic order and painful realization of her aging body culminate in the climactic and catastrophic last encounter with the head. While the woman is examining "*sagging eyelids, wrinkles, rough and dry skin*" on her

aging face in the mirror of her bathroom, she suddenly sees through the mirror that the head is getting out of the toilet as the human-sized embodiment of her young self (Chung, 2021, p. 17):

> [...] The delicate hands spread their long, thin fingers and pushed down against the rim, bringing up a narrow pair of fine-boned shoulders and slender arms. The rich black hair reached all the way down the smooth back, followed by the sensuous line of a svelte waist and white, voluptuous buttocks and firm thighs [...] The leg was white and long and slim. The calves were precisely the right size, the muscles tensing a little as the foot was brought up, the ankle dainty. The other foot emerged, and its exquisite toes lightly touched down on the bathroom floor. The drenched, naked body shone in the yellow, dim light of the bathroom. The woman kept staring into the mirror [...] The woman saw the face of her youth reflected next to her own sagging face (Chung, 2021, p. 17).

Having grown into a beautiful and young woman, the head now looks exactly like the woman's younger body. Recalling Lacan's mirror stage during which the child misrecognizes its image in the mirror as its own in the process of the ego's development, the woman's recognition of the head as her own younger self through the mirror could signify the "*fundamental incomplete[ness]"* of the subject as posited by the identification between self and other that "*are always unstable, illusory, grounded in discrepancy and lack*" (Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 126). While "*the ego is formed through a recognition of its body in the mirror phase*" as "*the body's parts, its energies and flows structure the ego's boundaries*" (Grosz, 1989, p. 77), no such boundaries can be maintained in abjection as could be recognized in the mirror scene in Chung's story. The head's appearance as the woman's younger body as reflected in the mirror blurs the boundaries between the woman and the head, hence giving rise to abjection. The beautiful and young body of the head is both the woman's and not hers at the same time. Familiar as it is, her younger body as embodied by the head is "*created not through a womb and placenta but through the colon and defecation*" (Chung, 2021, p. 19). Besides, it is not the body she has now as an aged woman. It is this "*unsettled separation*" between her young and old body, "*the boundary between subject and object is shaken*" and "*the limit between inside and outside becomes uncertain*", which leads to abjection that appals the woman (Kristeva, 1982, p. 78, 141).

The head explains to the horrified woman that it has finally completed her body and requests her to give it some clothes so that it can "*hide [its] shameful parts*" and "*be on [its] way*" as it has always wanted and planned (Chung, 2021, p. 18). As the woman is about to leave the bathroom to get some clothes from her wardrobe, the head stops her and insists that she give "*the clothes she is wearing now*" so that it will "*keep the heat and scent of [her] forever with [it] until the day [it] die[s]*" (Chung, 2021, pp. 18-19). The way the head describes the woman's body could easily evoke the maternal body that the subject expels from himself/herself in the process of his/her entrance into the symbolic realm but whose comforting warmth is always carried around and sought after by him/her throughout his/her life. Although the woman is first reluctant to take off her clothes on the cold bathroom tiles to give them to the head, she eventually decides to do it in order to get rid of it, which had been "*torturing her, but was now declaring independence. If this really was goodbye, and if they really were never to see each other again, what was a change of clothing to her?*" (Chung, 2021, p. 19). Shockingly enough, having put on the clothes the woman has taken off, the head stops the woman who has turned to leave the bathroom and says that her place is "*not out here*" but "*in there*" by pointing to the toilet (Chung, 2021, p. 19).

The head tells the woman that all she has left is "*that old lump of a body*" and now with its own "*human-like body*" with all the waste it has collected from the woman's body over the years, it "*shall take [her] place and enjoy everything [she's] enjoyed*" (Chung, 2021, pp. 19-20). In other words, the head's stripping the woman of her clothes essentially becomes an act of stripping the woman of her identity in its claim to take her place. The woman who gets furious with the head's attempt to replace her accuses it of being an "*ingrate*" and ruining "*what little happiness [she] had*" with "*all that disgust and hate*" it has caused throughout her life (Chung, 2021, p. 20). The head, on the other hand, expresses its anger towards the woman for having "*birthed [it] even when [it] didn't want it*" and tried "*at every turn to destroy [it] out of hatred and disgust*" (Chung, 2021, p. 20). This powerful last scene of confrontation between the woman and the head becomes emblematic of the intense and burdensome relationship between the subject and the abject. The story ends with the head's grabbing the woman with its strong arms, placing her in the toilet and flushing (Chung, 2021, p. 21). The woman whose psyche has been perturbed for years by the perpetual existence of the head as the abject is totally annihilated by it at the end of the story. Thus, the final scene of the story remarkably demonstrates "*what flows from the other's 'innermost being', for the desirable and terrifying, nourishing*

and murderous, fascinating and abject inside of the maternal body" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 54). To clarify, the final image of the head in the form of the woman's younger body that eventually consumes her becomes the perfect embodiment of the abject of the maternal body that not only gives life with its exuberance, productivity and youthfulness but also immerses and engulfs the subject into her own body and existence.

Conclusion

All in all, a Kristevan analysis of Chung's "The Head" provides the chance to gain an understanding into the continual and powerful existence of the abject in one's psyche and existence despite the rules, conventions and laws of the symbolic order designed to control and exclude it. In the story, the head made up of the female protagonist's bodily waste as the abject being signifies the maternal authority and the abjection of the mother as the first abject for the subject to become an autonomous individual within the symbolic order. Formed by the woman's excremental waste and menstrual blood, two forms of defilement that are maternal, the head designates the woman as its "mother" and therefore makes its connection to the maternal body clear. The head that terrorizes and disgusts the woman throughout the course of the story functions as the constant reminder of the maternal body in the semiotic realm from which the woman has had to separate herself throughout the process of her identity formation during the early stages of psychosexual development. Having been integrated into the symbolic order and internalized its rules and laws over the years, the woman strives to expel the abject from her psyche and life by following the conventions of the symbolic order through marriage and motherhood. Accordingly, it can be deduced that the nameless female protagonist who is referred to as "the woman" in Chung's story represents the female experience within the restraints of the patriarchal symbolic order. As such, it is crucial to recognize that in spite of resorting to the traditional feminine roles in the patriarchal symbolic order as a way of driving out the abject, the woman in Chung's story is unceasingly made aware of the fallibility of the symbolic rules and boundaries as represented by the ever-present existence of the head as something that belongs to the semiotic realm. The failure of the pre-determined symbolic laws and systems to provide the woman with a sense of fulfilment and unity, hence, exposes the tenuousness and constructedness of the symbolic laws and systems in confronting the abject.

Viewed in this context, the dreary final scene of the story in which the head deprives the woman of her identity and eventually replaces her epitomizes the victory of the head against the woman, namely, the triumph of the abject over the subject. The woman's confrontation with the abject that has become a haunting experience for her is functional to realize how the symbolic order has gradually lost its hold on her. Abjection "*signals both the disruption and the constitution of the subject*": while it is "*a state of crisis*" that threatens the borders between subject and object, it is also "*a constitutive process of rejection*" by which the borders between self and other are formed by excluding the abject (Keltner, 2011, p. 45). In Chung's story, this two-sidedness of the abject is observed in the female protagonist's endeavours to constitute and stabilize her sense of self and identity through conforming to the codes and rules of the symbolic order and taking on the roles of the wife and the mother in an effort to eliminate the abject. Haunted by the abject, however, she can never exclude it from her life and psyche as could be observed in her feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness and her ultimate replacement by the head at the end of the story.

Moreover, while the abject is in the form of an excremental and menstrual head in the story, the abject, as Kristeva underlines, is not simply "*lack of cleanliness or health*" but what "*disturbs identity, system, order*" (1982, p. 4). In Chung's story, as the embodiment of the bodily waste of the protagonist, the head shatters the protagonist's sense of "*clean and proper body*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 72) as well as the unity of her identity as it gradually becomes an inescapable part of her existence by upsetting the boundaries between self/other, cleanliness/filth, inside/outside. In doing so, the head as the abject exemplifies how it "*does not respect borders, positions, rules*" (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 72-74). The head's constant existence and influence on the woman's life and psyche and its final victory against her both affirms its capacity for disrupting the tenuous borders and boundaries established within the symbolic order and displays "*the frailty of the symbolic order itself*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 69). The replacement of the woman by the head, hence, highlights the failure of the "*religious, moral, and ideological codes on which rest the sleep of individuals and the respites of societies*" against the abject (Lechte, 1990, p. 158). All in all, what the ending of the story proves is that "*the abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgements. It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 15). Pointing to the first abjection—the abjection of the mother—as a necessary step for the subject in the process of gaining

its subjectivity, the abject makes one confront what he/she represses and excludes from him/herself in order to become an autonomous subject.

To conclude, as Lechte points out, "*abject can only be the greater if it remains hidden, unknown, unanalysed*" (1990, p. 158). Therefore, avoiding the abject means that "*a fundamental aspect of individual and social life remains in oblivion*" (Lechte, 1990, p. 158). Keeping that in mind, it could be concluded that Chung offers her readers to gain insight into and reflect on the abject through her compelling and shocking story. Revealing that the abject is repressed only to resurface in unexpected forms and ways, Chung's story displays the persistency of the semiotic on one's psyche and the fragility of the symbolic order in the face of the abject. Through its extraordinary depiction of the ubiquitous and forceful existence of the abject that destabilizes and overpowers the subject, Chung's "The Head" forces us to acknowledge and come to terms with the abject in order not to be overwhelmed by it.

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Summary

This study aims to analyse South Korean writer Bora Chung's "The Head" from the writer's short story collection *Cursed Bunny* (2021) by applying Kristevan term of "the abject". By featuring a disembodied talking head made up of the female protagonist's bodily waste, referred to as the head in the story, as a central character, Chung's "The Head" disrupts our

sense of normalcy and forces us to confront the abject, hence the fallibility of the boundaries established for the integration of the subject into the symbolic order through the lens of Kristevan theory of psychoanalytic development.

This study first deals with Kristeva's theory of subject development which is central to the understanding of "the abject". Kristeva proposes the term of "the semiotic" as the stage that is fundamental to the emergence of the self. During this stage which is "*pre-symbolic*" and "*pre-language*", the child and the mother are in a symbiotic relationship characterized by "*bodily interdependence, shared smiles, crying, and the abstract rhythms, sounds*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 14; Becker-Leckrone, 2005, p. 27). According to Kristeva, abjection is traced back to this early stage of the subject's psychosexual development, namely, to "*our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity*" (1982, p. 13). For the child to be able to form his/her subjectivity and to be integrated into the symbolic order he/she must abject the mother. The abject as the fundamental concept of Kristeva's theory of subject development, thus, essentially signifies the distinction between the semiotic realm and the symbolic order. Through the abjection of the mother as the first abject, the subject breaks away from the semiotic and steps into the symbolic order and constructs its subjectivity and identity. The abject is essentially what repels and disgusts the subject, including bodily fluids, waste, defilement, sewage, and filth, by threatening the boundaries between inside/outside, self/other, and subject/object. The abject that disturbs the borders and boundaries between self/other, inside/outside and subject/object within the symbolic order cannot be totally eliminated.

This study applies the concept of the abject as a useful medium to unveil the inescapable presence of the abject in one's psyche and the frailty of the symbolic rules and laws in the face of the abject within the context of Chung's "The Head". From the very beginning of the story, we are introduced to the realm of the abject in that we are faced with an abject being, namely a sentient and speaking disembodied head made of the protagonist's bodily waste. Moreover, by calling the woman "mother", the head reveals its connection to the maternal body, since "*if it is a jettisoned object, it is so from the mother*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 73). Made up of two forms of defilement that are maternal, namely, excremental and menstrual, the head becomes "*analogous to the mother who is both the object of waste and, with her menstrual blood, its distinctive source*" (Covino, 2004, p. 22).

This study focuses on how abjection both as "*a state of crisis*" that threatens the borders between subject and object and as "*a constitutive process of rejection*" by which the borders between self and other are formed by excluding the abject are represented in Chung's story (Keltner, 2011, p. 45). This two-sidedness of the abject is observed in the female protagonist's endeavours to constitute and stabilize her sense of self and identity through following the codes and rules of the symbolic order and taking on the roles of the wife and the mother in an effort to eliminate the abject. Haunted by the abject, however, she can never exclude it from her life and psyche as could be observed in her feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness and her ultimate replacement by the head at the end of the story.

Moreover, this study argues that as the embodiment of the bodily waste of the protagonist, the head shatters the protagonist's sense of "*clean and proper body*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 72) as well as the unity of her identity as it gradually becomes an inescapable part of her existence by upsetting the boundaries between self/other, cleanliness/filth, inside/outside in Chung's story. In doing so, the head as the abject exemplifies how it "*does not respect borders, positions, rules*" (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 72-74). The head's constant existence and influence on the woman's life and psyche and its final victory against her not only affirms its capacity for disrupting the tenuous borders and boundaries established within the symbolic order but also epitomizes "*the frailty of the symbolic order itself*" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 69). The final image of the head in the form of the woman's younger body that eventually consumes her becomes the perfect embodiment of the abject of the maternal body that not only gives life with its exuberance, productivity and youthfulness but also immerses and engulfs the subject into her own body and existence.

All in all, this study concludes that the dreary final scene of the story showcases the victory of the head against the woman, namely, the triumph of the abject over the subject. Revealing that the abject is repressed only to resurface in unexpected forms and ways, Chung's story exposes the persistency of the semiotic on one's psyche and the fragility of the symbolic order in the face of the abject. Therefore, by delving into the ubiquitous and forceful existence of the abject that destabilizes and overpowers the subject, Chung's "The Head" forces us to acknowledge and come to terms with the abject in order not to be overwhelmed by it.