



Cover Page



ABJECTION - RETHINKING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH THE KRISTEVIAN LENS

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Abstract

Abjection represents elements of understanding that individuals inherently reject. The abject is framed as something that is outside the acceptable epistemic categories. This very act of rejection is termed as Abjection by Julia Kristeva. This paper explores how the concept of abjection give way to the formation of margins of knowledge and in turn becomes an epistemic exclusion. The margin is created by fostering a collective identity while marginalizing those labelled as 'foreign' or 'other'. For Kristeva, the abject is deeply rooted within the self, implicating individuals in the very exclusions they project outward. Abjection points how the 'foreigner' even when socially and intellectually distanced, embodies something that is intrinsic to one's own identity. The concept of abjection subverts the stability of the knowledge systems and the identities constructed within them and necessitates a reconsideration of how society as a whole confront the unfamiliar. Kristeva's philosophy suggests that embracing the 'foreign' or that which is abjected or marginalized opens an inclusive knowledge system that acknowledges and is enriched by its margins.

Keywords: Abjection, Foreignness, Identity, Otherness, Epistemic exclusion, Inclusivity

Introduction

Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection provides a unique lens to examine the formation of social, psychological, and epistemic boundaries. Kristeva defines abjection as an act that provokes a sense of horror by threatening to violate the distinction between self and thus questions the stability of boundaries. Abjection is experienced by marking 'the other' as both dangerously foreign and yet disturbingly familiar. Kristeva argues that societies establish a sense of unity and identity by casting aside aspects they find threatening or impure, effectively constructing an 'abject' to solidify group identity. Those who occupy this position of abjection whom Kristeva calls as 'the foreigner' thus live at the margins of cultural and intellectual discourse, rendered simultaneously fascinating and repellent, included and excluded.

This process of abjection extends to the boundaries of knowledge itself. Epistemic exclusion is the systematic process by which certain perspectives, insights, and types of knowledge are sidelined or excluded, often because they are associated with marginalized groups. When a perspective is labelled as "other," it is more easily dismissed as inferior or irrelevant, rather than being integrated within mainstream knowledge systems. Here, Kristeva's insights become particularly valuable as the foreigner in her works is not only a social outcast but an epistemic outlier, embodying knowledge and experience that challenge accepted paradigms. This paper argues that Kristeva's theory of abjection reveals the underlying mechanisms of epistemic exclusion and demonstrates how the construction of intellectual boundaries serves to marginalize the 'foreign' knowledge associated with these strangers.

This paper seeks to explore the ways in which knowledge systems themselves are structured through processes of exclusion, often guided by deep-seated cultural biases. Kristeva's work questions the coherence and rigidity of knowledge by emphasizing the self's entanglement with the 'foreign' or abject elements it seeks to exclude. This tension destabilizes the binary between insider and outsider, suggesting that what is excluded might actually constitute an essential part of collective identity and knowledge. Through an analysis of Kristeva's theory of abjection, this paper aims to reveal the overlooked, "abject" elements within knowledge itself and proposes an alternative model for understanding and integrating marginalized perspectives. Kristeva's ideas urge us to reconsider the boundaries of epistemology, offering a vision of knowledge that is inclusive of those perspectives that were traditionally cast aside.



Cover Page



Abjection in the Philosophy of Julia Kristeva

Julia Kristeva introduces abjection as a phenomenon in Powers of Horror. Abjection refers to the process by which the self, differentiates itself from what it perceives as impure, disturbing, or threatening. Unlike traditional forms of exclusion, abjection involves the expulsion of something that is neither fully outside nor fully inside the self. It occupies a liminal space, confronting individuals with what they seek to destroy but cannot entirely eliminate. Abjection is most powerfully experienced in encounters with bodily fluids, death, or decay as they challenge the illusion of a stable, coherent self by confronting one with their mortality and fragility. Kristeva explains that abjection is not merely an intellectual rejection but a bodily reaction that produces disgust and horror. Kristeva emphasizes that abjection is crucial to maintaining a coherent sense of self by casting out elements that disrupt the boundaries of identity. (Kristeva, 1982 p. 4). This reaction for Kristeva is critical to maintain personal and social identity, as it allows the individual to draw a line between what is considered self and other, clean and polluted, acceptable and taboo.

Psychologically, abjection represents the return of what has been repressed like the chaotic, primal aspects of existence that must be cast aside to establish order and subjectivity. Kristeva argues that abjection extends beyond the individual, functioning as a societal mechanism to demarcate who belongs and who is cast out. (Kristeva, 1991, p. 68). That is culturally, abjection operates through the mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization, creating a clear distinction between those who belong and those who do not. In this way, abjection functions as a protective barrier against the dissolution of identity, both personal and collective.

The Concept of Abjection in the Societal Realm

Kristeva extends the concept of abjection beyond the individual psyche to the societal level. Kristeva argued that the societies maintain order by abjecting those who fail to conform to normative identities, positioning them as threats to the social body (Kristeva, 1991, p. 98). Societies, like individuals, establish their identities by casting out what they perceive as threatening or disruptive to their collective order. The “abject” in society often includes marginalized groups, ideas, and behaviours that challenge dominant cultural norms. These elements are treated as polluting forces that must be excluded to preserve the integrity of the social body. For instance, abjection can be seen in the ways societies stigmatize those who do not conform to conventional standards of race, class, gender, or sexuality. Individuals who fall outside these norms are often portrayed as dangerous, unclean, or inferior, reinforcing the social order by defining who is ‘normal’ and who is “not-normal.” The act of abjection thus becomes a tool for maintaining social cohesion, ensuring that those who deviate from the norms of the majority or those in power are kept at the margins. However, the process of abjection is inherently unstable. What is cast out does not disappear; it lingers at the boundaries of the social order, constantly threatening to return and destabilize it. This creates a paradox in which the abject is both necessary for the construction of identity and a persistent reminder of its fragility. Abjection is therefore an ongoing process, a continual effort to reaffirm boundaries that are always at risk of collapsing.

The Role of the Foreigner: The Externalized and Internalized "Other"

In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva explores the figure of the foreigner as a primary example of the abject in society. The foreigner is simultaneously an externalized “other” who exists outside the dominant cultural group and an internalized figure that represents the disowned aspects of the self. The foreigner embodies the paradox of abjection as they are both different and similar, both outside the community and a reflection of its hidden anxieties.

Kristeva argues that the foreigner disrupts the illusion of a unified identity by exposing the artificial nature of social boundaries. The foreigner is not simply an outsider but a reminder of the inherent strangeness within the self. This recognition can provoke fear and hostility, as the foreigner becomes a symbol of what society wishes to expel but cannot fully eradicate. The foreigner’s presence challenges the stability of identity by revealing that the boundary between “us” and “them” is porous and constructed.



Cover Page



At the same time, Kristeva suggests that the foreigner holds a unique potential to transform society. By acknowledging the foreigner within, individuals can begin to question the rigid categories that define belonging and exclusion. This recognition offers the possibility of a more inclusive understanding of identity, one that embraces difference rather than rejecting it. The foreigner, in Kristeva's view, is both a threat and an opportunity. It is a figure that destabilizes identity while also offering the possibility of a more expansive and inclusive sense of self.

Epistemic Exclusion: Defining the Margins of Knowledge

Epistemic exclusion refers to the systematic marginalization of certain forms of knowledge, often rooted in a particular social or cultural identities of those who produce it. Knowledge systems, much like societies, rely on boundaries to determine what constitutes valid knowledge and who is permitted to contribute to its development. These boundaries are often constructed through the exclusion of perspectives that challenge dominant paradigms, particularly those associated with marginalized or "foreign" groups. The presence of the foreigner reveals the instability of social boundaries, as they are both a reflection and a disruption of the collective identity (Kristeva, 1991, p. 45).

Kristeva's theory of abjection offers a compelling framework for understanding this process. Just as the abject is expelled to preserve the coherence of individual and collective identities, epistemic exclusion involves the rejection of knowledge that threatens the dominant intellectual order. This excluded knowledge is often labelled as irrational, irrelevant, or inferior, reinforcing the authority of mainstream epistemic frameworks while marginalizing alternative perspectives.

Application of Abjection to Knowledge Systems

Kristeva's concept of abjection can be applied to the mechanisms of epistemic exclusion, where certain types of knowledge are cast out as "abject" to safeguard the dominant knowledge system. This occurs in various contexts:

Colonial Knowledge Systems: In colonial contexts, indigenous knowledge systems were often dismissed as primitive or superstitious, reinforcing the colonizers' superiority and justifying their domination. These forms of knowledge were deemed incompatible with the scientific rationality of the West and thus relegated to the margins of intellectual discourse.

Gendered Exclusion: Historically, women's contributions to knowledge, particularly in science and philosophy, have been systematically excluded or undervalued. Feminist scholars have highlighted how knowledge associated with women or feminine domains such as domestic labour or caregiving has been abjected to uphold male-dominated epistemic systems.

Kristeva lens provides a perspective of how knowledge systems reinforce their boundaries by rejecting what they perceive as foreign or incompatible. Yet, as with abjection in identity formation, this process is inherently unstable. The excluded knowledge persists at the margins, continually threatening to disrupt and transform the dominant epistemic order.

The Persistent Presence of the Abject

Despite efforts to exclude certain forms of knowledge, the abject remains present at the margins, constantly threatening to destabilize the dominant system. As Kristeva emphasizes, the abject cannot be fully eradicated. It lingers as a haunting reminder of what the system seeks to suppress. In knowledge systems, this manifests in the growing recognition and integration of marginalized perspectives, whether through postcolonial studies, feminist epistemology, or interdisciplinary approaches that challenge traditional academic boundaries.

Kristeva's insights reveal that the boundaries of knowledge are not as rigid as they may seem. The excluded, the abject, and the foreign constantly press against these boundaries, highlighting the limitations of any system that claims universality. Recognizing this dynamic opens the door to more inclusive and transformative approaches to knowledge, where the margins are not merely tolerated but actively engaged and valued.



Cover Page



Rethinking Boundaries: From Exclusion to Integration

Kristeva's concept of abjection highlights the instability of rigid boundaries, whether in identity or knowledge. Epistemic exclusion, like social exclusion, relies on the artificial division between what is deemed valid and what is dismissed as foreign or irrelevant. To move toward a more inclusive knowledge system, it is necessary to rethink these boundaries not by erasing them entirely, but by recognizing their fluidity and the value of the knowledge they traditionally exclude.

An inclusive knowledge system acknowledges the contributions of marginalized perspectives, not as peripheral or supplementary, but as central to the expansion of understanding. This requires a shift in how knowledge is valued and categorized. Instead of prioritizing dominant paradigms that often reflect the interests of the powerful, inclusive systems must create space for alternative epistemologies that challenge and enrich mainstream thought. This involves embracing interdisciplinarity, cultural plurality, and the integration of experiential knowledge alongside established scientific and philosophical frameworks.

Toward a Transformative Epistemic Model

Kristeva's insights offer a transformative vision for epistemology. By embracing the foreigner within, knowledge systems can become more reflective, adaptive, and inclusive. This involves creating spaces where diverse perspectives can engage in dialogue, challenging the dominance of any single narrative and fostering a more pluralistic understanding of truth. In this model, knowledge is not a fixed commodity but an evolving process shaped by continuous encounters with difference.

Kristeva's work invites us to imagine a knowledge system that is not defined by exclusion but by the perpetual negotiation of boundaries. It is a system where the abject is not feared but embraced as a vital source of growth and transformation. Such an epistemology would be inherently open, recognizing that the margins are not threats but opportunities for expanding the horizons of understanding.

Conclusion

Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection takes a unique stand in analysing the processes of epistemic exclusion, revealing how knowledge systems, like identities, are maintained through the rejection of the foreign and the abject. By drawing parallels between the expulsion of 'the foreigner' and the intellectual dismissal of alternative epistemologies, Kristeva highlights the fragility of the boundaries that define knowledge. The foreigner, as both an external figure and an internal presence, symbolizes the constant siege between inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and strangeness.

This paper tried to explore Kristevian insights that destabilize traditional epistemological frameworks, emphasizing the need to rethink the margins of knowledge and to recognize the value of the perspectives that have historically been excluded. Through an analysis of abjection, the foreigner emerges not as a threat to knowledge but as a catalyst for its expansion, challenging dominant paradigms and opening new pathways for understanding.

Moving toward a more inclusive knowledge system requires confronting the discomfort of the abject, embracing the complexity of multiple perspectives, and dismantling rigid epistemic boundaries. Kristeva's work reminds us that knowledge is never complete or static but is instead an evolving process shaped by continuous engagement with difference. In this vision, the margins of knowledge are not merely sites of exclusion but spaces of potential transformation, where the integration of the foreign and the abject can lead to a richer, more dynamic understanding of the world. By acknowledging the strangeness within and valuing the contributions of those at the margins, we can cultivate a more inclusive, fluid, and humane epistemology, one that reflects the complexity of human identity and the richness of diverse ways of knowing. Kristeva's insights challenge us to reconsider what it means to know and to belong, urging us to embrace the foreigner not as an outsider but as an essential part of the ongoing pursuit of knowledge and self-understanding.



Cover Page



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