

Abjection of Body: Quest for Identity, Freedom and Maturity in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*

- Hukum Thapa

Abstract

This paper analyzes abjection of body in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*. The young adult protagonist of *The Chocolate War*, Jerry Renault encounters social and psychological abjections. In addition this paper discusses how social and psychological abjections work in *The Chocolate War*. By and large this paper argues that abjection of body supports to quest identity and freedom. It also discusses how the young adult protagonist employs his body to obtain identity and freedom. Therefore, this paper contends that abjection is necessary condition each individual passes through before reaching into maturity, the condition in which they realize the need for conforming to the society. For the analytical purpose, it draws the insights of abjection from Julia Kristeva and Karen Coats. This paper provides an opportunity to know the young adult body and the conditions of abjection. Moreover this paper facilitates to know the ways of triumphing over abjection and results the young adult obtains after overpowering abjection.

Keywords: abjection, identity, freedom, maturity, and young adult

Introduction

The Chocolate War published in 1974 by Robert Cormier is one of the most frequently-banned contemporary young adult novels. *The Chocolate War* incorporates Jerry Renault, Archie Costello, Brother Leon, Emile Janza, Obie, the Goober, Carter and Jerry's father as major characters to deal with themes and motifs of violence, power, masculinity, coercion, abjection, groupthink and societal oppression. Among these characters, Cormier projects Jerry Renault, a fourteen years old young adult and a freshman at Trinity School, as a struggling protagonist to pursue his identity, freedom and maturity. This book revolves around bullying over Jerry by the Trinity School administration and Jerry's war against harassment of adults. Jerry employs his body to overcome the abjection. Therefore, this paper unplugs the conditions of abjection of young adult body and its consequences. This paper hypothesizes that abjection of young adult body remains as a means to obtain identity, freedom and maturity.

Abjection in *The Chocolate War*

Abjection refers to the marginalization or state of being cast off. Julia Kristeva and Karen Coats categorize abjection into social and psychological. Social abjection happens via social institutions such as school, college, and any other social organizations whereas psychological abjection refers to the self-abjection. Regarding abject adolescents, Kristeva in *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection*

remarks that an abject is “the jettisoned object, which is radically excluded and drawn toward the place where meaning collapses” (2). She means that adults and social institutions ignore the will of the adolescents. In the same way, Cormier poses young adult protagonist Jerry Renault as socially abject from the beginning of *The Chocolate War*. The Trinity School Vigils led by Archie Costello, a school gang, asks Jerry to sell chocolate without his interest to fulfill hidden motif of Brother Leon. Leon wants to be a chief administrator of the school by showing large amount of chocolates sale. The school administration disregards and marginalizes Jerry because of low grade performance. Moreover, Jerry faces abjection even in the football ground by his peers. He gets severe injury. He has “broken nose, a scar on his cheek like a stitched shoe-string” (2). His body seems to “telescope” into itself but all the parts don’t fit. The narrator confirms, “They murdered him” (1). Here ‘murder’ refers that Jerry is being beaten by his peers and adults severely with the support of the institution. Jerry’s body demands more revolts and changes in the response of that abjection he faced in the football ground. Jerry loves the voice, “Show up tomorrow” (2). This voice clearly indicates his desire to show his presence in the football ground through his body. In this background, the third person omniscient narrator claims, “For three days his body had absorbed punishment” (8). Here, punishment indicates the abjection to the body of Jerry.

Moreover, Cormier projects his young adult protagonist Jerry Renault as socially and psychologically abject. Jerry involves in violence when he gets abjection and he uses his body to avoid the abjection. Agreeing with young adult activities, Karen Coats in “Abjection and Adolescent Fiction: Ways Out” remarks, “Both social and psychological abjection precipitate violence in the narratives of young-adult fiction” (139). Here Coats agrees with Julia Kristeva about abjection. Kristeva also critiques: “abjection is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred, that smiles, a passion that uses body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you”(4). Kristeva claims that crime itself is abject. Like ways, Jerry faces social as well as psychological abjection in the trick of black box as well. Brother Leon and Archie Costello hoax Jerry by the black box to force him to sell chocolates. Here clearly we can find that Adults are abusing or abjecting the young adult body. In this circumstance, Robert Cormier says: “Most grownups, most adults: they were vulnerable, running scared and open to invasion” (11). This argument plainly suggests that adults abject the young adults for their advantages. Adults try to dictate the body of young adults. However, young adults revolt against such activities by using their body. They involve in violence and they are ready to abject their body as well.

Kristeva defines that self-abjection relates to the experiences of individuals.

They lose the desire and wants within themselves. They remain unexpressed and uncertain about their objectives. She explains self-abjection as:

The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundations of its own being. There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded.(5)

In the same way, Jerry encounters psychological abjection repeatedly. He relishes self-alienation. Equally Jerry tends to hide things from parents as well as peers. Jerry has lost his mother who died of cancer. Jerry does not want to disclose his feelings with his living father whose life seems to be too boring to him. Every time he asks what the day was like, the father would repeat the same word 'fine'. Even when he threw that word back to the father, he would not notice it. Jerry feels that his father abjects him.

Moreover abjection of self refers to the repression. Kristeva marks, "The abject would be the 'object' of primal repression. In the same way, Jerry feels 'invisible' and Janza beats Jerry severely and insults in the boxing ring even though Jerry has power to resist. The novelist presents Jerry as an abject. He inscribes, "They rendered him invisible, eliminating him from their presence. He was invisible, without body, without structure" (86). It suggests the obvious abjection of the body of Jerry. Jerry faces social suppression. This suppression instigates Jerry to engage in violence and bodily activities.

Similarly, Cormier presents Jerry as emotionally and physically handicapped young adult. Jerry feels completely frustrated when he does not gain any support from his friends as well as adults people. He faces abjection from every corner. On the one hand, Archie has beaten him, on the other hand, Janza in the boxing ring hits Jerry as hard as possible. In return, Jerry hits back to Janza using his strength but Jerry feels pain throughout the length of the body. In addition, the crowd chants for Janza to kill Jerry. Here, Jerry confronts social as well as social as well as psychological abjection. Some of them were yelling "kill them, kill them" (123). The crowd was impatient for the action. However, Jerry is in bad shape. He has broken jaw and internal injury. His mind was clear "suddenly apart from his body, floating above his body and floating above the pain" (125). Toning with this state, Kristeva says, "abjection is ambiguity" (10). Jerry is found confused to overcome that state of abjection. However, he intends to exploit his body to defeat the abjection. He tries to solace himself by saying "Take it easy Goober, it does not even hurt anymore. See, I am floating, floating above the pain" (126). He attempts to hide his pain and damage in his body. He claims that such abjection bolsters him to face upcoming difficulties.

Thus, abjection of body prevails in *The Chocolate War* from the beginning. The young adult protagonist Jerry encounter abjection in the different circumstances. The young adult protagonist Jerry faces abjection basically in the school context. Jerry confronts at Trinity School. He clashes with social as well as psychological abjections as suggested by Julia Kristeva and Karen Coats. However, Jerry faces abjection focused on his body and he uses his body to overcome it. In this way, Robert Cormier presents not only how the body of young adult is abjected but also how he uses his body to reverse the abjection.

Quest for Identity and Freedom

Identity and freedom remain major issues for young adults. They do not get appreciation easily from the adults and the society. They have to strive hard to establish themselves in the society. Young adults are always in search of identity and freedom. They want to get released from the control of adults. They desire to ascertain their distinctness in the society through the different means such as body, food, dress, hair style and clothing. Among the diverse means, this paper claims that body can be a medium to explore identity and freedom. The politics of body of young adults performs a significant role to garner their freedom and identity. The politics of body involves varied activities such as fantasizing, celebrating, abusing and abjection of the body. However, this paper focuses on how young adults obtain their identity and freedom through the abjection of body.

Generally adolescents remember their ‘fragmented body’ of their childhood. Adolescents consider their body is uncoordinated, vulnerable and insufficient. They have a sense of frustration with physical limitations. So, Coats reads “fragmented body concept as abjection and therefore structurally speaking, adolescence is a time of apocalypse” (139). Coats means to say that adolescence period itself is uncoordinated and is like abjection. That disaster or abjection does not discourage them but it strengthens the young adults to explore their identity and freedom. Jerry Renault of *The Chocolate War* uses his abjected body to revive his lost freedom and identity even after he faces violence and cruelty on the football ground. Jerry murmurs, “I have got guts” (1). This murmuring of Jerry depicts his motivation for the revolt. From that revolt he wants to gain his space among the Trinity school community.

The adolescent period encounters many ups and downs – more mistakes and less corrections. In this context, Coats contends, “It is a last battle to establish one’s place (or not), finally and irrevocably, within the Symbolic order” (145). Adolescents try hard to stand on their feet by doing many errors in their course of trial. If the adolescents enable to authenticate their place through their body and mind, that place remains as a matter of identity for a long time. Harmonizing with this idea, both Holden of *The Catcher in the Rye* and Jerry of *The Chocolate War*

endeavor to use their body and mind to authenticate their place after abjection of the body.

Similarly, Jerry of *The Chocolate War* has used his body and mind to show his presence among the friends. His school friends and adults often call him 'a square boy'. He gets abjection from every corners in the school from class room to football ground. Nobody cares of the loss of his mother. One day he finds the image of his mother on the face of the father and he shows his determination in this way:

Jerry looked at himself in the mirror, saw himself as the guy on the Common must have seen him the other day: Square Boy. Just as he had superimposed his mother's image on his father's face, now he could see his father's face reflected in his own features. He turned away. He did not want to be a mirror of his father. The thought made him cringe .I want to do something, be somebody. (26)

Jerry plainly says that he does want to be like father. He aspires to be something more and to be a person of himself. He intends to draw a new line in his life.

Similarly, Kristeva claims: "The abject does not cease challenging its master. The abject and abjection are safe guards" (2). She means that the abject seeks to gain the lost recognition and liberty. The abject refuses to follow the guidelines provided by the adults. In the same way, Jerry challenges his masters from the beginning of the novel. He tries to resist chocolate selling up to the boxing ring. He defies Brother Leon, Archie and other masters who abject him or who force him to sell the chocolate. Brother Leon figured that Renault was the carrier of the disease of resistant of not selling the chocolates. However, Jerry says, 'No' (48). Jerry continuously flouts the chocolate selling. He remains a person of noticed and he intends to demonstrate his presence among the Trinity School community. He strives hard to obtain his identity and freedom even if he is abjected.

Moreover, Coats defines adolescence as a "period of identity crisis" (137). Adolescence period does not have stable identity. This is the time for adolescence to apply different means to establish their identity. They use their style-hair / clothes to form their distinctiveness. Likewise, Renault Jerry faces 'identity catastrophes' from beginning of novel because of abjection. he uses his style-hair /clothes to form his individuality. In the same situation, Jerry does not gain his stable identity in the school as well as in the society. He gets abjection from the adults and his friends in the school as well as in the social activities. He tries hard to break his identity crisis situation. He uses his body to reverse the situation. In the same way, in *The Chocolate War*, Renault Jerry faces identity crises from the beginning of the novel. He is beaten in the football ground and his friend The Goober advises him, "Coach is testing you and he is looking for guts" (1). Even his peers inspire him to be abjected to obtain identity. He believes in 'calisthenics'

to win the heart of coach and to project his stable identity. Renault employs his abjected body to achieve his self.

Furthermore, Kristeva opines: "The abject appears in order to uphold 'I' within the other. The abjection is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new significance" (15). Kristeva means that abject intends to establish own individuality. The abjection is an experimentation to revive new life of the abject. In the line of this idea, Jerry resists chocolate selling emotionally and physically in the soft way to avoid more personal damage. But all adults and young adults combine their force to intimidate Jerry. Jerry feels invisible himself, without body and structure. The person narrator reveals Jerry's state in this way:

He was tired of being afraid and tired of being intimidated. Jerry walked freely down the corridor, headed for the cafeteria, swinging along with the crowd, enjoying his absence of identity. Approaching the stairs, he felt himself pushed from behind and he pitched forward, off balance. He began to fall, the stairs slanting dangerously before him. Somehow he managed to grab the railing. He held on, pressing his body against the wall. He knew he was not invisible any longer. (82-83)

The given reference clearly indicates the frustration as well as the revenge feeling of Jerry. He intends to be visible. He aims to regain his personality and establish his self-determination. He aspires to use his mind and body.

Additionally, self-alienation is a common feature of the heroes of psychological abjection in young adult novels. Jerry tends to hide things from parents as well as peers. Jerry has lost his mother who died of cancer. Jerry does not want to share his feelings with his living father whose life seems to be too boring to him. Jerry is experimenting different stages of life to obtain his maturity, freedom and identity. Even from the self-alienation, he is enjoying. He seems to be happy. Self-alienation helps him to be strong to search his stand in the society. Similarly, Jerry also gains his maturity and identity after self-alienation. Jerry goes home painfully and quietly. He does not want anyone to see him. He washes himself, and lays in the dark, wishing his mother were there. His father is at work on the night shift. As Jerry lies in bed. He answers, but again, hears only cackling. Soon, the phone calls change and instead of laughing, the voice on the other end says things like "come out and play, Jerry" (80). Jerry looks out the window and sees figures in the phone rings darkness and threatens to call the police. The phone rings through the night, and eventually Jerry's dad takes it off the hook. Jerry decides not to tell his father what is going on as he does not want his dad involved at all. At that time novelist posturizes Jerry in this way, "Jerry willed his body to loosen, to relax. After a while, sleep plucked at him with soft fingers, soothing away the ache" (81). This posture suggests that Jerry's body feels better.

Cormier presents Jerry as an abject. Jerry feels completely frustrated when he does not gain any support from his friends as well as adults people. He faces abjection from every corner. On the one hand, Archie has beaten him, on the other hand, Janza in the boxing ring hits Jerry as hard as possible. In return, Jerry hits back to Janza using his strength but Jerry feels pain throughout the length of the body. In addition, the crowd chants for Janza to kill Jerry. Therefore, he is abjected socially as well as psychologically. Some of them were yelling “kill them, kill them” (123). The crowd was impatient for the action. However, Jerry is in bad shape. He has broken jaw and internal injury. His mind was clear ‘suddenly apart from his body, floating above his body and floating above the pain’ (125). Toning with this state, Kristeva says, “abjection is ambiguity” (10). Jerry is found confused to overcome that state of abjection. However, he intends to exploit his body to defeat the abjection. He tries to solace himself by saying “Take it easy Goober, it does not even hurt anymore. See, I am floating, floating above the pain” (126). He attempts to hide his pain and desires to demonstrate that such abjection bolsters him to face upcoming difficulties.

Conclusion: Abjection of Body as a Catalyst

Identity, freedom and maturity are the important concerns in the life of young adults. Young adults strive hard to gain these belongings in almost every time. They suffer a lot to quest these important things. There are multiple ways to obtain these things. Among multiple ways, young adults can search these issues through the abjection of body. In the same way, Jerry Renault of *The Chocolate War* faces abjection from the beginning to the end of the novel. Jerry faces abjection in the football field, class room and boxing ring. However, the abjection does not discourage him. It encourages him to revolt and bolsters him to gain his freedom and identity. Initially, Jerry does not get his identity and freedom. Nobody listens him. He continuously resists his inability to sell chocolate. He obtains fatal injuries physically and psychologically from his peers as well as from adults but he does not give up his stand. But, at the end, Jerry admits that he was wrong in trying to disturb the universe. This realization of Jerry echoes the growth into maturity.

Therefore, abjection of body does not discourage the young adults. It remains as a catalyst to gain their identity, freedom and maturity as Jerry succeeds to resist the suppression and abjection from the adults and social institutions throughout the novel. The body abjection capitalizes identity, freedom and maturity.

Works cited

Coats, Karen. “Young Adult Literature: Growing up, in theory.” *Handbook of Research on Children’s and Young Adult Literature*, edited by Shelby A. Wolf et al. Routledge, 2011, pp.315-329.

- , "Abjection and Adolescent Fiction: Ways out." *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature*, edited by Shelby A. Wolf et al. Routledge, 2011, pp.138-160.
- Cormier, Robert. *The Chocolate War*. Frey and Rollin, 2004.
- Costello, Donald P. "The Language of *The Catcher in the Rye*." *American*, vol.34, no.3 1959, pp. 172-181. *JSTOR*,www.jstor.org/stable/45408. Accessed 22-03-2019, 02:13 UTC.
- Daly, Maureen. *Seventeenth Summer*. Simon & Shuster, 1942.
- DeLuca, Geraldine, and Roni Natov. "An interview with Robert Cormier." *The Lion and The Unicorn*, vol.2, no.2, 1978, pp.109-135. DOI: 10.1353/uni.0.0330.
- Hinton, S.E. *The Outsiders*. Viking Press, 1967.
- Julia, Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Sutton, Roger. "Robert Cormier." *Children's Literature Review*, vol.55, 2004, pp.1-39
- Tarr, C. Anita. "The Absence of Moral Agency in Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*." *Children's Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press, vol.30, 2002, pp. 96-124.
- Trites, Roberta Seelinger. *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. University of Iowa Press, 2000. *JSTOR*,www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20q20zp. DOI: 10.2307/j.ctt20q20zp.