

Articulating the Abject: Horror as a Subversive Tool in the Poems of Aleena's *Silk Root*

Gopika Gopan,

M. Phil Scholar,

Institute of English, University of Kerala, India

Received: August 1, 2022

Accepted: November 7, 2022

Online Published: November 8, 2022

Abstract

Dalit women's bodies are often regarded as the site of disgust, impurity, and oppression. Dalit women are abjected into an inflexible position and their differentiated bodies are perpetually marked as the other. Dalit women's bodies are stripped of moral claims and had been treated as sexual slaves, which indicates the heightening of their abjection, as a major mode of social exclusion. Aleena's characters in her poetry collection *Silk Root* are mostly ghosts, demons, vampires, mentally ill etc. Just as these figures are alienated and excluded by the dominant social structure, so are the Dalits. Julia Kristeva's theory of 'abjection' is useful in our understanding of the deplorable state of Dalit women. Dalit women's subjectivity is tossed into a space of abjection which ratifies a two-fold existence of fear and desire. Just as the subject rejects the abject, the society reject the Dalits that threatens its stability. Dark skin, Dalit identity and female sexuality constitutes the abjectification of Dalit women.

Keywords: Abjection, Dalit poetry, casteism, feminism, horror

Contribution/Originality: The article "Articulating the Abject: Horror as a subversive tool in the poems of Aleena's *Silk Root*" do a psychoanalytic study of the characters of selected poems of Aleena's poetry collection *Silk Root* through Julia Kristeva's abjection theory.

Introduction

Aleena is a Malayalam Dalit poet from Pathanamthitta in Kerala. Her poetry collection *Silk Root* deals with the themes of Dalit identity and community. The narrator of these poems is a Dalit woman, who leads a simple life in a village in the high ranges of Kerala. The speaker is a person who has caste and religious backwardness and belong to the lower rung of the society. In her

poems, Aleena places Dalit women at the centre and vividly expresses the racial exclusion, religious discrimination, and occupational uncertainty they experience. Her poems don't try to sensationalise or fantasise about the life of the downtrodden. The subjects of her poem are women who suffers everyday life issues, who are subjected to family harassment, humiliation and are constantly ridiculed on their skin color or physical or mental illness or due to their identity as a woman as well as a Dalit. She is depicting the lives of the marginalised women in her poems not to lament but to reveal that the spirit of the desire for life, insights, strength, survival, spirituality, and imagination exist in these neglected and uneducated women.

Downtrodden Women

Aleena's poems look into the downtrodden women's sufferings and struggles, their religious beliefs, resentments, dissatisfaction, their physical and sexual conditions, and their resistance to the repercussions of public consciousness. Her poems take a curious look into the downtrodden women subjects and their diverse world of experience. The underlying female identity of Aleena's poems develops into a public representation that grows and embraces their Dalit Christian identity. The essence of the feminist politics that these poems carry is a biological dissection rather than a continuum. Aleena's poems rarely take up the conflicts that liberal feminism raises in Kerala. It draws on the marginalisation and the independent authorship developing on the subaltern women of Kerala. Aleena's poetry builds in the realist mode but moves beyond it. The poems that are chosen for the study from her poetry collection *Silk Root* are "Prethabhadhayulla Perakya", "Kinar", "Aaru Kannum Naalu Mulayumulla Pennungal", "Ente Fridge", "Ottamulachi" and "Penthalachi Prandhi".

The poem "Prethabhadhayulla Perakya", deals with the desires of a woman named, Kunjeli. Kunjeli commits suicide as she was rejected by the grooms who came to see her as they didn't find her beautiful. Thus, she couldn't find a partner in her life as she was dark; on the other hand, her friend Elizabeth, a fair-skinned woman, easily got married. On the day of her death, Kunjeli's friend Elizabeth planted a guava sapling in front of her home in memory of her lost friend. When Elizabeth got pregnant, the guava flowered for the first time.

‘Chuvannakamulla velutha kuruvulla perakyamakal.’

[Guava with pink flesh and white seeds in the kernel.](Aleena, 2021, p.17)

When Elizabeth gave birth to the baby Filomina, the guava tree had small guavas. When Filomina grew up and tasted the guava for the first time, she dreamed of Kunjeli, where Kunjeli complained to her that her mother Elizabeth and the villagers had forgotten Kunjeli.

‘Nintamma enne marannu pooyaloodi’ nn kunjeli engaladichu karanju. (Aleena, 2021, p.17)

[How could your mom ever forget me dear, uttered Kunjeli in between her sobs.]

On the next day, Filomina had menarche. In the poem, the menstruation of Filomina is compared to the redness of the guava she ate. Just like the ripened juicy guava Filomina had also reached the ripened adolescent stage of her life.

‘Avalude pavadayil kaumaram perakkajuicepole olichiragiyathumuthal,

Filomina peramaram kerinadanna kochukuttiyallaathaayi.

Elizabeth chirichu.

Kunjeliyum chirichukond kannuthudachu.’

[She could no longer be the same child seen climbing

and subduing guava trees ever since her nonage

had dripped like guava juice through her skirt

chuckled Elizabeth

Kunjeli joined her while wiping tears.] (Aleena, 2021, p.17)

In this poem “Prethabhadhayulla Perakya”, the guava tree stands for Kunjeli’s dreams and desires. Kunjeli desires to get married, conceive infants and take care of them. Kunjeli’s dream to have a life like that of Elizabeth. She lives her lost life through the guava tree. She tries to stay alive in the mind of the people through the guava tree. In this poem the author assigns human

desires to the tree. The identity of the Dalits has been essentialised to their bodies. Kunjeli in the poem represents Dalit women who are continuously rejected by men both within the Dalit community as well as the *savarna* men. The question of caste lingers in the Dalit's corporeal surface – the Dalit body is a constant reminder of an individual's Dalit identity. Her desire to have a happy life, just like her friend Elizabeth, has been denied due to her dark complexion. Even Dalit men try to disown their Dalit identity by refusing to marry a dark-skinned Dalit woman. In this process, get involved the abjection of dark Dalit bodies. Thus, they try to build supremacy by expelling the other. Julia Kristeva explains that abjection can elucidate the political and structural actions of exclusion and inclusion that create the basics of societal existence. According to Kristeva,

the abject has a double presence; it is both within 'us' and within 'culture' and it is through both individual and group rituals of exclusion that abjection is 'acted out'. Abjection thus generates the borders of the individual and the social body. (Kristeva, 1984, p.136)

The continuous rejection of Kunjeli by men because of her dark complexion speaks the society's inability to process and acknowledge the black body as a redeemable being. Dark-skinned lower caste women are always a figure of abjection. The concept of dark skin as ugly, abnormal, and inferior points to the challenges of operating in systems of representations that stereotype dark-skinned people. Their existence is against the order of society, which accepts only fair-skinned women. Thus, they are in a relentless state of misery and degradation. The guava tree stands for kunjeli's come back. It represents Kunjeli's resistance to the power that once destroyed her. The guava tree stands for the corporeal existence of Kunjeli.

In the poem "Kinar", Aleena talks about a character named, Shakuntala who had a lemon tree on the side of her well. The author doubts that the root of the lemon tree had spread into the well or there is another lemon tree growing under the well; hence the water in the well taste like lemon.

‘Narangayude neerirangi maduricha kinarumvellam.

Chilappo kinattinadiyilum narakam kaanum.’

(The well water was sweet by the dripping of the juice of the lemon

Perhaps there might be a citrus tree underneath the well too.) (Aleena, 2021, p.35)

Thus, the well and its lemon tasted water are in great demand in the village. On a night, Shakuntala accidentally fell into well while she sneaked out to meet her love. On the next day she was seen carried wrapped in a mat with her stomach swollen with lemon-tasted water from her well. Then the lemon has the taste of Shakuntala. The water has the taste of ghost and death. The well gifted the lover the dead body of Shakuntala. From then on, nobody used the well.

‘Athil pinne narangakalkk shakuntala chechiyude ruchiyaan.

Vellam kudichu chatha prethathinte manamaan.

Kamukann kinar kodutha shavam.

Pinneyaarum aa vellam kudichittilla.’

[Thereafter, the citrus trees there got the taste of Shakuntala

and the smell of the flaccid corpse

of one who died of drowning

The corpse gifted to the lover, by the well

Never ever anybody drank from that well.] (Aleena, 2021,p.36)

The well that was once used by everyone in the village no longer stands as a desirable entity. Just like that Shakuntala whose body was so bright and attractive once, just as the lemon tree in front of her home and as tasty as the water in the well, suddenly become unattractive. Her body, swollen with the water of the well, becomes a body of disgust, a matter of fear, a material of abjection. Shakuntala, who was once a body of desire, suddenly turned out to be a ghost, an undesirable existence, a matter of abjection in society. Ghosts are feared and are exterminated by the living space. According to Kristeva, the abject is that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order.

What does not respect borders, positions, rules.’ (Kristeva, 1984, p.4) This ghost is an abject that threatens the subjectivity of the corporeal bodies. To preserve society’s sense of stability, the trauma needs to be discarded, just as the subject rejects the abject, society being the subject and ghost, the abject. Shakuntala, lemon, and her well, were once desirable things for society, but when Shakuntala turned into a corpse, she became unwanted, and the water in the well-turned disgusting. Kristeva explains that a corpse exists between the border of life and death. It was there, but it is no longer what it was. There is a breakdown in meaning. People generally fear or ignore that existence that lacks the usual meaning. Women are always bodies. When it lost its desirable form, society define them as ghost, an object of abjection.

“Aaru Kannum Naalu Mulayumulla Pennungal”, narrates the story of a demon who has six eyes and four breasts and haunts the women during their menstrual cycle. The demon makes them sleep with her cool breeze when the women have menstrual cramps. Thus, she enters their dreams. And these women cry and laugh in their sleep. They suck her four breasts which taste like tender coconut with honey. She smells like Jasmine. When tears drop from her six eyes, these women woke from their sleep sweating. Whoever drinks her breast milk will die in their sleep, and these women turn into a demon with four breasts and six eyes and haunt other women in their dreams.

‘Veendum urakkam.

Vidarnna aaru kannukal swapnathil chimmum.

Naalu mulakal veendum churathum.

Avale kudichu vattikkunnavaararoo avar urakathil marikkum.

Aaru kannum naalumulayumulla ammamaaraayi adutha pennugale thiranj

swapnangaliluude alanju nadakum.’

[Lulled again.

The six wide eyes would blink in dream

The four breasts would brim and burst with milk

Whoever drank up her would die in sleep

They would roam again searching in their dreams for missus

With four breasts and six eyes.] (Aleena, 2021, p.64)

Aleena's poetry moves from being a mere chronicle of body trauma to a careful subtext of symbolic unspeakable, or barely visible conditions beneath. When women have their menstruation, their body that emits blood is an object of abjection. Menstrual blood is always associated with impurity. Kristeva (1984) states, 'the abject is always impure because it transgresses boundaries' (p.21). She says, 'the impure is that which does not respect boundaries' (p.80). They are undesirable bodies. The outside patriarchal world ignores them when they are in pain from menstrual cramps. The ghost in the poem stands for these women's inner desires. The ghost with six eyes and four breasts makes the women sleep with her cool breeze, feeds them breast milk, and takes them away from corporeal existence. They are completely lost in the haunted world, roaming, free from the pains and burdens of corporeal life. Towards the end of the poem, these women with normal bodies turn into six-eyed and four-breasted women. Thus, they are both the victims and the oppressors.

The marginalised women's bodies are always a site of resistance and refusal. It is always constituted in opposition to dominant power structures. Dalit women's bodies are abject materials that are considered impure. When the upper caste claims Dalit women's bodies as impure/untouchable, they assert their own identity as pure. Kristeva (1984) said that 'pure/impure opposition represents the striving for identity' (p.23). Kristeva suggests that the impure is that which is constructed as deviating from an actual state of ordinary homogeneity. The women who turned into six-eyed four-breasted mothers, move beyond the bodily restrictions, craving for fragmentation, actively seeking to resist the body's standard assembly or organisation, and thereby acknowledging the self as other or split.

In the poem "Ente Fridge", the author says that her favourite place in her home is the fridge, which is as cold as the bottom of her heart. The narrator compares the fridge to a confessional room. She says that her fridge has the smell of death. It breathes the devil's air, CFC

(Chlorofluorocarbon). She says that her fridge looks like hell, a mortuary, and cemetery. Inside the freezer lies the head of her tinder date. Besides the blue colour spread over the skin, she is still beautiful. Since the beloved's hands and legs can't be fitted inside the fridge, they were thrown to the dogs on the seashore. The intestines were rolled and stored in the rack of vegetables. Lover's heart which looked like a bouquet of roses that was kept at the bottom of the freezer was beating. The rack meant to keep bottles had two kidneys. Just like the red sunshine, the fridge also turned reddish. The poet says at the end that her lover's coffin, the fridge, is her favorite place.

'Kayyum kaalum vekkaan idamillaathakond

kadaltheerathe pattikalkk kadichu parikkan koduthu.

Kudalmaala churutti pachakkarithattilitittund.

Rosappu bouquet poolirunna avalude hridayam

freezerinte thaazhe vakkumbozhum pidakyunnundaayirunnu.

Bottle shelfil randu vrikkalalum njengi njerinyirunnu.'

[As the space was so squeezing, all the limbs

were amputated and casted at the dogs

straying in the beach for tearing upon

The gut code has been coiled and placed on the vegetable vending stand

Her bosom appeared like a rose bouquet was still pulsating

Her kidneys were squeezing for space inside the bottle shelf.] (Aleena, 2021, p. 51)

This poem creates fear and abjection in the reader with its grotesque images. Here the author has applied the 'fridging' process, where the murdered character is 'fridged' or 'stuffed in the refrigerator'. Fridging represents death. Through the poem the readers catch the idea that the author adores her fridge as it has the smell of death. The refrigerator is an electric appliance used to store food items to maintain their nourishment and freshness and thus prevent it from decay;

turns out to be a coffin in the poem. The author says that her fridge looks like hell, mortuary, and cemetery. What generates fear in the reader is the picture of human blood used in the poem. The fridge is as red as the sunshine. The image of human blood inside the fridge creates abjection, a notion of things not being where they are supposed to be. It reminds mortality, makes aware of human corporal form, and questions the significance of flesh by externalising its internal functions. The abject material like blood is meant to be contained within the body but, upon expulsion, forces the readers to confront their own corporeality. Dalit literary works no longer seek sympathy from the readers by depicting their hardships and struggles. Aleena's poems are an excellent example of that. Using violence, murder and grotesque images and themes, she exhibits her resistance to the existing social structure of the society. Her characters are bold and powerful. By embracing the abject materials and images, Aleena breaks the constructed borders, positions, and rules.

In the poem, "Ottamulachi", author depicts a nineteen-year-old, Unnikuttan. One day, after having his dinner, when Unnikuttan went to bed, he saw a breast between the window bars. The best breast that Unnikuttan had ever seen in his life was that of the washerwoman, Njezhi. To check who that is at the window, he went near the window and that is when somebody squeezed his neck. He saw the two round eyes. But immediately, his vision blurred. In the morning, Unnikuttan was found in his bed, lying like a dead worm, blood drained and body crushed. He was just dark blue skin. His family cried at his death. Washerwoman, Njezhi's daughter, Kunjimol, shouted that on the previous day, she saw a woman with loose hair and anklets on her legs, walking up the hill. It is Kalladikotte Neeliyamma.

"Njan kandathamme, njan kandathaa.

angele mala keripookunnu.

Azhichitta mudi, kaalel chilamb"

'Kalladikootte neeliyamma

Njezhi moolude vaapothi.

Neelikku neernna povagozhi!

Njezhi chirichu.’

[I had seen mom, I had seen just scaling the hills

Unfurled, cascaded hair

Anklets on legs

Neeliyamma of Kalladikott

Njezhi cupped her palm on her daughter’s mouth

The right cock for Neeli

Chuckled Njezhi] (Aleena, 2021,p.85)

Women are always associated with body. Women are sexually objectified. They are denied subjectivity. In the poem Unnikuttan looks at the breast of his washerwoman and comments that it is the best breast that he had seen in his life. His sexual desire is evident in his words. For men women are body parts to be looked at and to be used to fulfil their desire. The upper caste men had sexually exploited the lower caste women who work as their servants. In the daylight, these downtrodden women are materials of abjection, whose single touch is considered polluting but at night their bodies are desirable. Her untouchable body suddenly becomes touchable. According to Haslanger (2013)

“When it comes to women’s sexual objectification by men, the men view and treat women as objects of male sexual desire, the men desire women to be submissive and objects like and force to submit and men believe that women are in fact submissive, and object like by nature.” (p.28)

At the end of the poem, Unnikuttan was murdered by a single-breasted woman. The single-breasted woman stands for the entire Dalit women community. The vengeance of the entire community is evident in the line where Njezhi closed the mouth of her daughter thus stopping her from giving details of the single-breasted woman and Njezhi’s smile at the end. Aleena doesn’t depict a subversive, silent, suffering woman but a powerful woman who destroyed men who

exploited her. The single-breasted woman is the vengeful incarnation of Njezhi. The disembodied entity, single-breasted woman stands in the space of liminality, in a zone between life and death. She is a liminal entity that exist in the 'no man's land' between the natural and the supernatural. Aleena uses liminal space because although liminality seems to be threatening, it offers its passengers such as monster, ghost, vampire etc., a temporary space of belonging where men and women are equal. The society always try to avoid liminal places as they are unsettling and abject.

In the poem "Penthalachi Prandhi", the author describes a mad woman who scratches her head and picks lice and kills them by blabbering something. The villagers found her as a bad omen. Her hair was dry without oil. She had round red eyes which were frightening. Her body had scratch marks. The children cried out loud when they saw her, and they soon went to sleep when they were told that she would come and pick them up if they didn't sleep. She was considered bad luck in the village. They believed that if someone happened to see her or listen to her blabbering, then death is sure. When Molly chechi went to cut banana leaf, she was bit by a snake, Valsa's daughter died on the way for her delivery, the rank holder of the village eloped before the result was announced, Shanta who went to take a bath in the pond didn't came back, her body was not found. The author finally warns the readers that if somebody see a woman who scratches her head, don't listen to her, just close your ears, and run.

Panchayath kinattungare,

Pennungal vellam koraan

Kudavumaayi varinikkumboo

penum chorinjuparichupozhichu

pichum peyum paranj nikkum

kaattuparambile parandhu pidichath.

Annamayam vatti paaripparanna mudi.

Chora thudichu therikkunna,

pedippikkunna kann,

maandhichorinja paad

deham muzhuvan.

ottaykk thottilengum pookalle

ath pilleerr kandalum

pedichu kaarum.

raathreel prandhide peer minndiyaal

pedichurangum.

[When the womenfolk queue up at the public well with their pots

The insane one in the wilderness would hover there whispering,

scratching her lousy hair

The lack-lusted rough flying hair

Bloodied, horrifying eyes

Scratch marks all over the body

Don't go to the brookside

Or anywhere alone

Younglings may cry in fear

Hearing the name of the insane

Would sleep in fear.] (Aleena,2021, p.123)

The poem “Penthalachi Prandhi” portrays the story of an insane woman who is ignored, feared, contemptuous and abjected by the villagers. Her presence or even a glimpse of her shadow is considered a bad luck. Julia Kristeva states that mental illness is an abject consideration, as the mentally ill defy several sets of traditional boundaries. The mental illness that includes phenomena such as visual or auditory hallucination questions the stability of our typically conceived five senses, intimating the delusional sufferer as outside the realm of normal sensible and perceptual behaviour. The poem’s protagonist keeps scratching her head, picking up lice, killing them in public, and blabbering. These actions are against the order of society. The rules of society consider such actions in public as disgusting. People generally show abjection to such actions such as scratching head and picking lice in public. Here Kristeva’s articulation of abjection as disturbing identity and order are full on display.

Abjection and normality form a dichotomous pairing, with the boundary between them becoming the critical decision point for the abject subject. Once made abject, there are only two options available to a subject, either they may return over the boundary into the realm of normality, or else they are condemned to the ultimate abjection of death. (Kristeva, 1984, p.140)

The supernatural ability that the villagers think the insane woman in the poem possesses separates her from that which is normal and stable in the world. Thus the abject are continuously repressed and ignored. Patients who suffer from mental illness are the abject that lies external to the symbolic order, evoking a feeling of disgust, anxiety, fear and repulsion. Children in the village are said not to go near the insane woman as she is a ghost. Her dry hair without oil, her body full of scratch marks, her round red eyes, and all these bodily features against the normal make her the subject of abjection. Thus the insane woman becomes distasteful, disgusting and frightening.

Conclusion

Through the usage of abject materials like menstrual blood, madness, ghost etc. Aleena try to attack the ideologically constructed female bodies. Through demonic figures Aleena tries to give voice to the unspeakable. Whatever is marginalised and repressed by society, in psychological

terms by the super-ego, finds expression in Aleena's supernatural representations such as ghosts, demons etc. Aleena's characters are mad or ghost women, abjected figures of the society, who suffer from neurotic disorder and transgress what is defined as normal by culture. Kristeva notes that abjection works within intrinsically patriarchal systems. Barbara Creed explains that abjection works within these systems 'as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject' (Jancovich, 2009, p.68). Dalit women, in Aleena's poems are represented as non-human, partially formed subjects that are constituted in opposition to the dominant symbols of the patriarchy. However in contrast to patriarchal systems that paint Dalit women as victims, women in Aleena's poems are often monstrous. Aleena, in her poems, depicts subjectivities that vary from the norm. They are invisible existences in the society.

References

Aleena. (2021). *Silk root*. Goosebery Books.

Body politics. (n.d.). *Kristeva and the Political*, 87–109.
https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203326954_chapter_4

Fletcher, J., & Benjamin, A. E. (2014). *Abjection, melancholia and love: The work of Julia Kristeva*. Routledge.

Goh, R. B. (2014). The semiotics of undesirable bodies: Transnationalism, race culture, abjection. *Semiotica*, 2014(200). <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2014-0002>

Harradine, D. (2000). Abject identities and fluid performances: Theorizing the leaking body. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 10(3), 69–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486800008568597>

Haslanger, S. A. (2013). *Resisting reality social construction and social critique*. Oxford University Press.

-
- Henderson. (2012). Commentary: The abject and the grotesque: Broken bodies, broken dreams, and the lost promise of Harlem. *Black Camera*, 4(1), 210.
<https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.4.1.210>
- Hennefeld, M., & Sammond, N. (2020). *Abjection incorporated: Mediating the politics of pleasure & violence*. Duke University Press.
- Humanities, S. in the. (2005, December 1). "wondrous material to play on": Children as sites of gothic liminality in the turn of the Screw, the innocents, and the others (critical essay). Apple Books. Retrieved July 26, 2022, from <https://books.apple.com/us/book/wondrous-material-to-play-on-children-as-sites-of/id521139544?l=ar>
- Jancovich, M. (2009). *Horror, the film reader*. Routledge.
- Kenway, J., & Bullen, E. (2011). Skin pedagogies and abject bodies. *Sport, Education and Society*, 16(3), 279–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2011.565961>
- Kimmich, A. (1998). Writing the body: From abject to subject. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 13(2), 223–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.1998.10815130>
- Kristeva, J. (1984). *Powers of horror: An essay of abjection*. Columbia University Press.
- Kutzbach, K., & Mueller, M. (2007). *The abject of desire: The aestheticization of the unaesthetic in contemporary literature and culture*. Rodopi.
- Lethabo King, T. (2010). One strike evictions, state space and the production of abject black female bodies. *Critical Sociology*, 36(1), 45–64.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920509347140>
- Mavin, S., & Grandy, G. (2014). "bodies, appearance, abjection: Women elite leaders' intra-gender experiences". *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2014(1), 14243.
<https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2014.14243abstract>

Simmons, A. (2015). Abject excess and the monstrous feminine. *Antichrist*, 77–82.

<https://doi.org/10.3828/liverpool/9781906733414.003.0003>

Views and opinions expressed in this article are the views and opinions of the author(s). International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Review (IJHSSR) shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability etc. caused in relation to/arising out of the use of the content.