

Harry's abjection in Roald Dahl's short story *Poison* (1950)

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.071025/dp3c1y43>

Date of Submission: 21-12-2025

Date of Acceptance: 09-01-2026

Date of Publish: 09-01-2026

Abstract

This study explores Harry's abjection to otherness he faces in Roald Dahl's *Poison*. Abjection is theorized by Julia Kristeva by underlining humans' disgust reactions to anything stated as the other. Dahl's story tells about an Englishman named Harry who asks for help since he thinks there is a snake under his bed. A doctor named Dr. Ganderbai comes and reveals that the snake is non-existent. Harry is furious by stating the doctor as "dirty little Hindu sewer rat" since he assumes that the doctor has accused him of being a liar. Through qualitative method and explorative approach, this paper investigates that what Harry says is a disgust to Dr. Ganderbai as the other. Harry's abjection is shaping a radical differentiation between self and other. He is not only rejecting the doctor, but he is phobic to him, shaping his image as the filth, the condemned, and the threatening one. Harry is also pointing to his postcolonial position in which English people will undermine Indian ones as their former colony. In conclusion, Dahl's short story indicates Harry's abjection that creates steep differences between self and other, Englishman and Indian, and even the noble and the filth one.

Keywords: Abjection, Julia Kristeva, Poison, Roald Dahl

INTRODUCTION

Rejection of what may seem strange to oneself is a common trait of every being and this rejection of what is radically different from oneself is what Kristeva calls as abjection (Kristeva, 1982; Pournamasari, 2024; Tyson, 2015; Wijaya et al., 2025). According to the quotation before, the researchers could claim that abjection could be a basic human mechanism for keeping its identity and limits through contempt or rejection of something considered a threat. By rejecting what seems foreign or threatening, a person constructs a boundary between 'me' and 'not me' in their mind. In this way, the human mind begins to form identity and self-definition: this is me, and this is not me.

Kristeva states that food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection (Kristeva, 1982; Pournamasari, 2024; Tyson, 2015; Wijaya et al., 2025). It means that a human, even from infancy, begins to learn to distinguish which parts belong to the self and which do not. For example, a six-or seven-month-old baby that learning to eat, may reject a new food with an unfamiliar texture or taste because it feels strange to the body. In another case, a boy who sees chicken blood in a traditional market may find it repulsive because it is not part of him, and his mind instinctively rejects it. In harmony with the above quotation, something or other very different from oneself arises a feeling of disgust or fear.

The denial is a basic defense mechanism (Hasana et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Reku et al., 2025; Sarmi et al., 2024). A feeling of discomfort, fear, or disgust toward something not completely foreign, but also not fully part of oneself, engendered a conflict within. Therefore, it gives rise to the body's response of nausea, disgust, or wanting to distance. From the examples of curdled milk, excrement, vomit, and corpses, Kristeva positions abjection as a process of expelling something that is actually a part of oneself (Kristeva, 1982; Pournamasari, 2024; Sarmi et al., 2024). The abject refers to anything cast out, rejected, or forcefully distanced from the self, such as sour milk, bodily waste, or even an overly engulfing maternal embrace.

Julia Kristeva (1982), in her research published later in a book entitled *Powers of Horror*:

An Essay on Abjection, stated that “The phobic has no other object than the abject. But that word, fear is such a fluid haze, an elusive clamminess, no sooner has it cropped up than it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of the language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer. Thus, fear having been bracketed, discourse will seem tenable only if it ceaselessly confront that otherness, a burden both repellent and repelled, a deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.” That quotation explains that a phobic person is not only fearful of certain objects but is something deeper: abject, that is, what is considered offensive, threatening his limits, or unacceptable (Hasana et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Reku et al., 2025).

Meanwhile, in Roald Dahl’s *Poison*, Harry figures experience extreme fear when he believe that there is a poisonous krait lying on top of him. According to the Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory, Harry’s fear is not merely a fear of dangerous animals, but it is Harry’s psychological reaction to something that is considered foreign, disgusting thing that threatens his limits (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Sarmi et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). These ambiguous fears, as Kristeva explains, fade away like a mirage and permeate the language with the luster of hallucinations. This is seen when Harry overreacts, panics, suffocated by fears that he cannot even logically explain.

To extend this psychological perspective further, *Poison* also presents a deeper level of abjection when the supposed snake is revealed to be non-existent, yet Harry’s hostility intensifies. Instead of relief, he turns his fear into disgust toward Dr. Ganderbai, an Indian doctor who attempts to help him (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). Harry’s racial outburst becomes a manifestation of abjection toward the “other,” indicating how disgust, fear, and colonial prejudice intertwine.

His rejection of Dr. Ganderbai mirrors Kristeva’s argument that abjection is not only a bodily reaction but also a mechanism for maintaining identity by casting the other as impure, threatening, and inferior (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004; Sarmi et al., 2024). Thus, Dahl’s story becomes a revealing narrative of how abjection shapes extreme boundaries between self and other, especially within a postcolonial context.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative method with an explorative approach to examine the portrayal of abjection and otherness experienced by Harry in Roald Dahl’s *Poison*. The qualitative method is chosen because this study focuses on interpreting psychological, linguistic, and symbolic elements within the narrative rather than measuring data numerically. The explorative approach allows the researchers to trace the layers of Harry’s reactions, fears, and disgust, particularly in relation to Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory. All research activities, including finding sources related to Julia Kristeva’s abjection theory, reading supporting journals, and examining the text of *Poison*, are done through online research platforms. The data of this study come from the short story itself and theoretical references related to abjection. The data analysis includes collecting the needed materials, reading the story carefully, identifying parts that show abjection, comparing them with Kristeva’s concepts, and quoting relevant statements to support the argument. The interpretation focuses on how Harry constructs Dr. Ganderbai as the “other” through disgust and fear. All sources used in this study are written properly in the reference list.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Abjection Affects a Person’s Reactions and Emotions

Regarding data analysis, there are several findings. The first finding involving abjection affects reactions and emotions. According to the theory abjection of Julia Kristeva (1982),

abjection or rejection of the body, it directly influences how a person reacts and feels emotion when confronted with something other than his or her body that is considered repulsive or threatening. Abjection produces a strong response by forcing a person to face things that he or she wants to reject or put away, making the body react with various intense emotions like fear, anxiety, or disgust. When the abject is perceived as disturbing one's sense of safety or psychological stability, a person may experience fear and anxiety, which in turn affect physical reactions such as trembling or sweating (Hasana et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Reku et al., 2025). In certain situations, when the abject is felt as a threat, the body may respond by freezing or triggering a panic attack. In line with the theory of abjection, these Harry's abject reactions and emotions are clearly present in Roald Dahl's short story *Poison*.

"Don't touch the bed! For God's sake don't touch the bed!" He was still speaking like he'd been shot in the stomach and I could see him lying there on his back with a single sheet covering three-quarters of his body. He was wearing a pair of pyjamas with blue, brown, and white stripes, and he was sweating terribly. It was a hot night and I was sweating a little myself, but not like Harry. His whole face was wet and the pillow around his head was sodden with moisture. It looked like a bad go of malaria to me." (Dahl, 1950)

The quotation above describes the moment when Timber finds Harry lying rigidly on the bed, and Harry then tells him that there is a krait on his body. In the text above, it is explained that Timber sees Harry's face drenched with sweat, to the point that the pillow around his head is soaked. According to Harry, a krait is lying on his stomach, yet Timber cannot see the snake because half of Harry's body is covered by a sheet. Timber can only see how terrified Harry is, to the extent that his voice resembles that of someone who has been shot. This shows that Harry's physical abjection reaction is reflected in his rigid and sweating body, indicating that the abject is perceived as a threat to him. This condition causes Harry to experience emotions fear and anxiety, which are evident in his soft and trembling voice, as if he were suffering from a gunshot wound (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019).

"We've got to be quick. Come on now, quickly, tell me where it bit you." He was lying there very still and tense as though he was holding on to himself hard because of sharp pain. "I haven't been bitten," he whispered, "Not yet. It's on my stomach. Lying there asleep." (Dahl, 1950)

The quotation above describes the moment when Timber wants to immediately help because he believes Harry has been bitten by a krait. However, in reality, the snake has not bitten Harry. Harry explains that the snake had crawled onto his body and is now lying asleep on his stomach. Harry's fear arises from the possibility that if the snake wakes up, it might bite him. As a result, the only reaction he can produce is to remain rigid and sweating while waiting for someone to help him (Bethari & Pasopati, 2024; Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004).

"I was reading," Harry said, and he spoke very slowly, taking each word in turn and speaking it carefully so as not to move the muscles of his stomach. "Lying on my back reading and I felt something on my chest, behind the book. Soft of tickling. Then out of the corner of my eye saw this little krait sliding over my pyjamas. Small, about ten inches. Knew I mustn't move. Couldn't have anyway. Lay there watching it. Thought it would go over top of the sheet." (Dahl, 1950)

The quotation above illustrates how Harry's abjection emerges and subsequently affects both his physical and emotional reactions. The abject he perceives triggers bodily responses such as rigidity and excessive sweating, as well as emotional reactions of fear because he believes that the threat is capable of disturbing his psychological stability (Dahl, 1950; Huang,

2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). Harry feels something crawling beneath his book, right on his chest, and the sensation is described as a light tickling on his body. When he looks from the corner of his eye, he realizes that the creature crawling on him is a small krait. Although the snake is small, the abject is sufficient to instill fear and anxiety in Harry. As a result, he remains completely still for hours, waiting for Timber to arrive. Remaining motionless with heightened anxiety causes him to sweat profusely.

“Hours and bloody hours and hours, I can’t keep still much longer. I’ve been wanting to cough.” (Dahl, 1950)

The quotation above illustrates that Harry is experiencing acute tension to the point that he has been waiting for hours for someone to come and help him, forcing himself to stay completely still with a rigid body even though he desperately wants to cough. This situation shows how abjection operates not only on an emotional level but also on the physiological level of a person. In this moment, Harry is trapped between the fear of staying alive and the threat of imminent death that becomes a primary trigger for abjection as a state in which the body reacts intensely to something perceived as capable of violating or endangering the boundaries of the self (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019).

Harry’s extreme fear of the krait snake he believes is lying on his stomach forces him to suppress his bodily movements unnaturally for hours, placing his entire physical system under immense pressure. This is what puts his body on the verge of losing control: he wants to cough, yet he suppresses that basic biological reflex because he fears that even the smallest movement might provoke the snake to strike. The internal struggle between the body’s automatic impulses and the need to remain completely still for survival creates a highly stressful psychophysiological state (Bethari & Pasopati, 2024; Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004). By stating so, abjection can completely dominate the body, compelling an individual to restrain even their most fundamental bodily functions, and producing an extreme level of tension that pushes the limits of both physical and mental endurance.

Abjection Shapes One’s Perception of the “Other”

Facing fear and anxiety at the threshold between life and the threat of death for hours makes it extremely difficult for Harry to accept that the abjective threat existed only in his imagination. After Harry discovers that the krait snake he has feared and that has triggered his abjection was never there and never real, the force of abjection redirects his reaction by positioning “the Other” as the new source of danger. In this case, the Other is the Indian doctor, Ganderbai. At this point, Harry’s abjective fear shapes the way he perceives people and events outside himself (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). His refusal to accept that he was wrong, and that the source of his terror never existed, causes him to project the remnants of that fear outward, casting Ganderbai as the embodiment of the threat that had previously been attributed to the imagined snake.

“A krait! Oh, my God! Where’d it bite you? How long ago?” ...The surprising thing was that Harry hadn’t been bitten. The bite is quite deadly except sometimes when you catch it at once and they kill a fair number of people each year in Bengal, mostly in the villages. (Dahl, 1950)

The quotation above indicates that Harry’s fear is not merely ordinary anxiety, but an extreme and overwhelming terror that completely dominates his mind, as he perceives the krait as an absolute threat capable of ending his life at any moment with a single bite if he makes the slightest movement. According to Julia Kristeva (1982) theory of abjection, anything that triggers feelings of disgust, horror, or a threat to the boundaries of the self will evoke an intense reaction to reject and distance oneself from it. In this case, Harry feels compelled to reject or

avoid the threat of death caused by the venomous krait's bite. This fear then generates powerful psychological and physiological responses within his body, controlling his entire physical and mental state (Hasana et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Reku et al., 2025). He forces himself to stay rigid and motionless, avoids speaking loudly, and even suppresses natural bodily reflexes such as coughing.

"Why, you dirty little Hindu sewer rat!"

"Shut up, Harry!" I said.

"You dirty black..."

"Harry!" I called. "Shut up, Harry!"

It was terrible, the things he was saying. (Dahl, 1950)

The quote above appears when Harry learns that the krait actually does not exist. After the tension subsides, Harry realizes that the abjection which had given rise to his extreme physical and emotional fear was, in fact, nonexistent. Harry's outburst toward Dr. Ganderbai reveals that his intense emotions do not simply disappear but instead seek a new target. This process, described in Julia Kristeva (1982) theory of abjection, is a form of social abjection a mechanism through which an individual expels, contaminates, or degrades others as a way to preserve their own identity and boundaries. In this case, Harry cannot accept that his fear over the past hours was unfounded. As a result, he needs "the Other" to bear the weight of the shame, frustration, and panic he previously experienced. By insulting Ganderbai with racist language, Harry redirects all his fear and vulnerability onto the doctor, reconstructing him as an alien, dirty, and inhuman figure (Hasana et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Reku et al., 2025). This act of rejection helps Harry reassert himself as a "clean," superior, and innocent subject, even though he knows his fear was never real.

Harry stood on his bed in his striped pyjamas, glaring at Ganderbai, and the colour began to spread out over his cheeks.

"Are you telling me I'm a liar?" he shouted.

Ganderbai remained absolutely still, watching Harry. Harry took a pace forward on the bed and there was a shining look in his eyes. (Dahl, 1950)

The excerpt shows that Harry no longer sees Dr. Ganderbai as the person who comes to his aid, but instead as "the Other," someone who must be attacked once the tension has subsided. Harry's outburst toward Ganderbai, as shown in the quotation above, suggests that all the fear, emotional distress, and shame he accumulated while believing there was a krait on his body have been transformed into aggression directed at the very person who tried to save him. In this situation, Harry is unable to accept that the danger which triggered his abjection was never real; therefore, he needs a new object to absorb the leftover fear (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004). Ganderbai who is perceived as socially and racially different from him becomes an ideal target for such projections.

By positioning Ganderbai as "the Other," Harry creates a psychological distance that allows him to discard his earlier sense of vulnerability and helplessness. His actions standing on the bed, glaring intensely, and shouting demonstrate how abjection transforms into social aggression (Hasana et al., 2025; Jones, 2022; Reku et al., 2025). Here, Harry not only refuses to take responsibility for his own fear but also attacks the person he identifies as a new threat in order to protect his identity, maintain his self-esteem, and reaffirm his personal boundaries.

Abjection Creates Illusion, Misinterpretation, and Psychological Distortion

Abjection does not only make a person feel fear or disgust, but it can also change the way someone sees reality. When a person feels extreme fear, their mind can create illusions or

false interpretations. This psychological distortion happens because the body is under pressure, and the mind tries to fill the empty spaces with imagined danger (Bethari & Pasopati, 2024; Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004). In Roald Dahl's *Poison*, Harry experiences this kind of distortion. His fear becomes so strong that he cannot separate what is real from what only exists in his imagination.

"Then out of the corner of my eye I saw this little krait sliding over my pyjamas... It went under the sheet. I could feel it through my pyjamas, moving on my stomach." (Dahl, 1950)

This moment shows that Harry is convinced a krait has crawled on his chest and is now lying on his stomach. However, the story later reveals that there was never any snake. Harry's belief is created by his fear, not by real evidence. The sensation that he "felt it moving" is part of the illusion produced by abjection. Abjection can blur the line between the body and something strange or dangerous, making the person interpret normal sensations (like fabric or a muscle twitch) as a serious threat (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). This data shows how Harry's mind transforms an unclear physical feeling into the presence of a deadly snake.

"Hours and bloody hours and hours, I can't keep still much longer. I've been wanting to cough." (Dahl, 1950)

Harry's intense tension shows that his fear has taken full control of his body. He stays frozen for hours, afraid that any movement will cause the snake to bite him. The abjection inside him builds a false danger in his mind, and his body responds as if the threat is real. His need to cough becomes unbearable, but he forces himself not to move. This data proves that fear and imagination can work together to create an extreme psychological condition (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). Harry's mind keeps telling him that one small movement equals death. In reality, nothing is on his stomach at all. His fear has created a strong illusion that changes how he interprets his own body. When the sheet is finally pulled back and the bed is completely checked, Timber and Dr. Ganderbai find nothing.

"Apart from the button there was nothing on his stomach." (Dahl, 1950)

Even when faced with clear evidence, Harry is unable to accept the fact that the snake never existed. Instead of feeling relieved by this discovery, he reacts with frustration and emotional resistance. The truth challenges his sense of perception and forces him to confront the idea that his fear was misplaced. This realization is uncomfortable and quickly turns into shame, as he feels embarrassed for believing in something that was never real. Rather than processing this shame internally, Harry redirects it outward. His fear transforms into anger, which he directs at Dr. Ganderbai (Dahl, 1950; Huang, 2017; Pasopati et al., 2024; Smith, 2019). Instead of viewing the doctor as someone trying to help, Harry takes the situation personally and interprets the explanation as an attack on his judgment. By blaming Dr. Ganderbai, Harry avoids confronting his own vulnerability. This response reveals how fear can evolve into shame and anger when someone struggles to accept the truth, ultimately preventing emotional growth and understanding.

"Are you telling me I'm a liar?" (Dahl, 1950)

At this point, Harry is no longer reacting to a physical threat. The abjection now affects his thoughts and emotions. He misinterprets Ganderbai's calm explanation as an attack on his dignity. The illusion of danger has already damaged his sense of judgment. When the fear disappears, he replaces it with hostility to protect himself (Bethari & Pasopati, 2024; Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004). This data shows that abjection can shift from physical fear

to mental distortion Harry cannot accept reality, so he creates another false idea: that the doctor is insulting him. Harry's psychological distortion becomes clearer when he starts insulting Ganderbai with racist words:

“Why, you dirty little Hindu sewer rat!” (Dahl, 1950)

This reaction shows that abjection has moved from fear of the snake to fear and disgust toward the “Other.” When Harry cannot accept that he was wrong, he looks for someone to blame. Dr. Ganderbai becomes the target because he is different he is Indian, not English. Harry's mind creates a new illusion: that Ganderbai is humiliating him or treating him as a liar. In truth, Ganderbai never accuses him. The anger comes from Harry's own psychological conflict. This shows how abjection can push a person to reject someone else to restore their pride and identity (Davis, 2023; Lowe, 2023; McAfee, 2004).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Roald Dahl's *Poison*, this study concludes that Harry experiences abjection in several different forms. Harry's fear of the krait shows how abjection can strongly affect a person's body and emotions. His reactions freezing, sweating, whispering, and being afraid to cough show that abjection can take full control of a person's physical and mental state when they face something they believe is dangerous. When the snake is revealed to be non-existent, Harry's abjection does not disappear. Instead, it changes direction. He begins to see Dr. Ganderbai as “the Other.” Harry refuses to accept that he was wrong, so he projects his fear and shame onto the doctor. This is shown when he insults Ganderbai with racist words. This moment proves that abjection can move from a personal fear (the imagined snake) to a social fear and rejection (toward a person who is different). *Poison* shows that abjection is a powerful human reaction. It can shape fear, identity, and even how a person sees others, especially in a context where race, power, and postcolonial attitudes still exist. Harry's abjection creates a clear boundary between himself and Ganderbai, showing the strong influence of fear, disgust, and social prejudice in shaping human behavior.

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