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Religious Extremism through the Lens of Kristevan Abjection

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the phenomenon of religious extremism through the concept of abjection as articulated by Julia Kristeva. The theory of abjection elucidates the psychosocial mechanisms by which radical groups construct identity through the rejection and demonization of the Other as a polluting threat that must be eradicated. It offers a critical framework for understanding how religious violence functions not merely as a political strategy but as a symbolic ritual aimed at affirming the purity of collective identity. Using a qualitative approach based on theory-guided textual content analysis and comparative discourse analysis, this study examines extremist narratives such as those propagated by IS, Buddhist nationalist movements in Myanmar, and Hindu extremism that deploy abject metaphors (e.g., “filth,” “germs,” or “contaminants”) to legitimize acts of dehumanization and violence. The findings indicate that abjection operates across three primary dimensions: (1) identity formation through the construction of a “us versus them” dichotomy; (2) the sacralization of violence as a form of jouissance (destructive enjoyment) and (3) the failure of traditional cathartic mechanisms, resulting in the transformation of abjection into uncontrolled terror. The study concludes that conventional deradicalization approaches often fall short by overlooking the psycho-abjective roots of religious violence. As an alternative, Kristeva’s framework suggests a more holistic counter-extremism strategy, one that includes abjection literacy education, intergroup dialogue, and the reinforcement of an inclusive symbolic order.

Keywords:

Abjection, collective identity, Julia Kristeva, religious extremism, violence.

Introduction

In philosophical discourse and social theory, the concept of abjection as articulated by Julia Kristeva offers a critical lens for understanding the dynamics of violence, sacrifice and terror within religious contexts. Kristeva (1982), in her seminal work *The Power of Horror*, defines abjection as a form of rejection toward elements that threaten the boundaries of identity, whether physically (such as the body or filth) or symbolically (such as values and beliefs). In the context of religious extremism, this mechanism of abjection can be clearly observed when radical groups

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construct their identities through the formation of “the Other,” such as religious or ethnic minorities, as entities deemed impure and therefore to be destroyed in order to preserve the imagined purity of their collective identity. Several empirical studies support this analysis, for example, Akbar and Isakhan (2023) report that IS labeled Yazidi and Shia minorities as “unclean.” The extremist monk Ashin Wirathu, who was labeled the “Face of Buddhist Terror” by *Time Magazine*, led an anti-Muslim campaign in which he accused Muslims of being terrorists and stated that they were “nothing more than mad dogs” (Awang et al. 2022). In another context, Buddhist nationalists in Myanmar equated the Rohingya ethnic group with “germs” (Ahmed et al. 2022). Furthermore, according to Petersen and Khan (2022), Hindu extremist groups in India accused Muslims of polluting religious purity through the narrative of “love jihad.” Meanwhile, white Christian extremism, as represented by Brenton Tarrant, portrayed Muslim immigrants as a “dirty invasion” (Vanlerberghe et al. 2025). All of these narratives demonstrate the use of abject metaphors to justify acts of dehumanization and violence. These data clearly indicate that abjection narratives are not merely rhetorical devices, but function as ideological foundations that drive genocide, displacement and systematic violence.

As explained by Pournami (2024), Kristeva’s concept of abjection not only elucidates processes of identity formation but also offers a framework for understanding how humans confront identity instability and threats posed by “the Other.” This phenomenon can be observed in forms of exclusive nationalism and xenophobia. In a broader dimension, abjection can also be understood as a social mechanism that functions to maintain existing norms and power structures. For instance, societies often abject certain groups, such as immigrants or minorities, in order to preserve stability and collective identity (Azhar 2024). Therefore, it is important to consider the relevance of the concept of abjection when discussing the phenomenon of religious extremism in contemporary society.

Conventional research on radicalization has often explained severe pro-group violence via social psychological frameworks, including group identification and more recently, identity fusion (Swann et al., 2015). Social identity theory highlights group identification as a mechanism by which personal identity is subsumed into a communal category, fostering in-group favoritism and out-group animosity. Identity fusion theory enhances this framework by illustrating that individuals can maintain a robust agentic personal identity while forming profound attachments to the group, a dynamic that has been shown to forecast a propensity for extreme self-sacrifice, including combat and death for the group (Swann et al., 2012; Gómez et al., 2011). Empirical research in many cultural contexts indicates that individuals with high group fusion are more inclined to support fatal pro-group acts, exhibit emotional responses to threats against group members and convert moral beliefs into violent behavior (Swann et al., 2010; Whitehouse et al., 2014). Although these models elucidate motivational intensity and self-sacrificial behavior, they provide less understanding into the symbolic and emotional processes, including disgust, impurity and boundary violation, that morally frame violence as purifying. At this psycho-symbolic level, Kristeva’s notion of abjection provides a supplementary theoretical perspective.

The theory of abjection proposed by Julia Kristeva in her book *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) has been widely discussed across various disciplines, including psychoanalysis, literary studies, feminism and cultural studies. The selection of Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection in this study is based on its unique capacity to unravel the active and psychophysical dimensions that underlie religiously framed rhetoric of violence. This theoretical foundation is rooted in Kristeva’s canonical work; previously mentioned as “the abject” as something repulsive and threatening because it blurs the boundaries between self and other, life and death, purity and impurity. It is precisely this concept that allows us to expose the pre-symbolic psychological processes behind the formation of the “scapegoat” that is, how a group is initially constructed as “filth” that must be rejected. This approach offers a different depth compared to René Girard’s theory in *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), which places greater emphasis on the sociological function of the victim as a restorer of communal stability, rather than on the internal psychic processes that precede and constitute the victim itself.

Meanwhile, analyses of the discourse of violence by scholars such as Talal Asad in *Formations of the Secular* (2003) which examines discursive contestations within traditions which are indeed highly valuable in the study of religion and violence. However, Kristeva's theory of abjection complements these analyses by probing the affective content of disgust and horror that renders such discourse so powerful and inciting. Moreover, applications of this theory in contemporary contexts, as demonstrated by Casper and Werther (2020) in *The Abject of Politics*, illustrate how Kristeva's concept of abjection operates within public discourse and how it is used to demonize particular groups. Thus, Kristeva's framework is not only important for explaining *what* happens in extremist discourse, but more profoundly for answering *why* such discourse is effective; because it taps into primitive instincts, one of which is the impulse to reject whatever is perceived as threatening to the self and to the symbolic unity of the community.

Nevertheless, its application in analyzing religious extremism remains limited and has yet to become mainstream within radicalism studies (Ismail & Kamaruddin 2020). Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth analysis of the mechanisms of abjection in the construction of religious extremism. Three main research questions are formulated in this study: first, what is meant by abjection according to Julia Kristeva's theory?; second, how does the mechanism of abjection function in the construction of religious extremism?; and third, how can Kristeva's concept of abjection provide new insights into the psychology and narratives of religious extremist groups? Through these questions, this article is not only descriptive but also critical in offering an alternative theoretical framework for understanding religious extremism.

Extremism: A Conceptual-Philosophical Overview

The postmodern era has given rise to a profound paradox in contemporary human experience. On the one hand, we enjoy levels of freedom, material prosperity and access to information that have never existed before. On the other hand, we are witnessing a sharp resurgence of extremism, fundamentalism and identity politics. To understand this seemingly contradictory phenomenon, it is necessary to trace the roots of the identity crisis that lies at the core of the turbulence of our time and to examine the way of this crisis finds destructive forms through various forms of contemporary extremism.

The Basis of the Crisis: A World That Has Lost Its Framework

Globalization, as the primary driving force, has radically transformed the landscape of human existence. This process is not merely an economic phenomenon, but rather a comprehensive transformation in the way reality is experienced. Geographical boundaries that were once clearly defined have now become porous, rendering national identity increasingly fluid. More profoundly, according to Xavier (2018), traditional social categories such as tribe, ethnicity, and religion, which for centuries provided stable frameworks for self-understanding, have themselves become fluid and unstable.

In traditional societies, identity was ascribed. It was given at birth, maintained through tradition, and reinforced by cohesive communities. Each individual knew with certainty their position within a clearly defined social order. The postmodern era has dismantled this certainty. Through travel, global media, and digital spaces, individuals are constantly confronted with alternative ways of life, differing values, and countless possibilities of identity (Viganò, Antonelli, Bischi & Tramontana 2015). While this condition opens up rich opportunities for self-exploration, it also produces what sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes as liquid modernity, a world without fixed form in which everything, including identity, is temporary and mutable. Within this condition of fluidity emerges what may be described as ontological anxiety, namely a fundamental uncertainty about who one truly is. When external markers of identity become unstable, individuals experience existential disorientation. This condition underlies the contemporary identity crisis, which is marked by the loss of stable reference frameworks through which individuals understand themselves and their place in the world.

The Two Faces of Consumerism and the Failure of Recognition

The dominant response to this ontological worry takes the form of consumerism. Advanced capitalist societies offer consumption as a solution to the crisis of meaning. Identity, within this logic, is no longer bestowed by tradition but constructed through choices of consumption, such as the brands we wear, the music we listen to and the lifestyles we adopt. However, what actually occurs is a sedimentation of lived experience. Life is reduced to a repetitive cycle of work and consumption, resulting in an existence that is flattened and devoid of spiritual depth. Consumerism offers temporary satisfaction but fails to fulfil the human need for transcendent meaning and a higher purpose (Faiza et al. 2025).

Parallel to this failure of consumerism is a systemic failure to meet the human need for recognition and it is here that philosophical analysis becomes crucial. The concept of *thymos* introduced by Plato, which refers to the part of the soul that seeks recognition and self-worth, finds its contemporary expression in the dichotomy developed by Francis Fukuyama, namely *isothymia* and *megalothymia* (McAleer 2020). According to Fukuyama (1995), *isothymia* represents the desire to be recognized as equal to others, as a human being possessing the same dignity. This desire forms the foundation of modern democracy and human rights. However, in practice, the promise of *isothymia* often fails to materialize. Globalization has generated profound economic inequalities and feelings of cultural humiliation among many groups. Numerous communities feel that their dignity is not recognized, that they are ignored, looked down upon or even humiliated by the dominant global order.

At the same time, *megalothymia*, which is the desire to be recognized as superior, as someone special or of greater value, encounters a deadlock in contemporary society (Fukuyama, 1995). In complex and bureaucratic societies, traditional pathways to recognition and greatness through achievement in art, science or political leadership increasingly appear closed. The result is a dual frustration. The demand for recognition as equals is unmet, while aspirations for excellence fail to find legitimate and meaningful channels.

Extremism as a Pathological Solution

It is within this context of dual frustration that postmodern extremism emerges as a pathological yet powerful form of resolution. Extremist movements, whether religiously based, ethno-nationalist or grounded in other ideologies, offer an escape from the identity crisis and the failure of recognition through several mutually reinforcing mechanisms (Bjørge 2004). First, extremism offers a clear and absolute identity. In a fluid and uncertain world, extremist movements reconstruct sharp boundaries between “us” and “them.” They produce what social psychologists refer to as a closed identity, one that is rigid, exclusive and often positioned in direct opposition to out-groups (Echelmeyer, Slotboom & Weerman 2023). For individuals experiencing identity disorientation, this offer carries a powerful appeal, namely a clearly defined place in the world and a definitive answer to the question, “Who am I?”

Second, and most importantly, extremism offers what can be described as monumental heroism, an escape from the flattened life of consumerism into a grand and dramatic narrative of heroism. The concept of monumental heroism, whose roots can be traced back to Nietzsche (Gemes, 2006), refers to a longing to participate in something greater than oneself, something epic and heroic. In a flattened consumer society, where life is reduced to the pursuit of fleeting pleasures, extremism offers transcendence through violence. A young person who may spend daily life in meaningless work and passive consumption can suddenly be transformed into a “warrior” in a cosmic drama between Good and Evil. Extremist acts, even the most destructive ones, are understood not as crimes but as heroic sacrifices for a noble cause (Griffin 2017; Nazaretyan 2018).

Third, extremism provides a solution for blocked *megalothymia*. Within a global order perceived as unjust, where many people feel that their voices and dignity are disregarded, extremist violence becomes a means of demanding recognition. An act of terrorism, for example,

is not merely a physical attack but also a symbolic performance designed to shock the world and force recognition (Wolfowicz et al. 2021). The message is unmistakable: "Acknowledge us. Fear us. We are a force that must be reckoned with." Within this framework, negative recognition in the form of fear and media attention is preferable to not being recognized at all.

Meta-Narratives in a Post-Meta-Narrative World

A hallmark of postmodern extremism is its capacity to foster what Jean-François Lyotard refers to as a "incredulity toward meta-narratives" while concurrently constructing alternative meta-narratives. Contemporary extremism is simultaneously a consequence of postmodern conditions and a defiance against them. Extremist movements adeptly utilize postmodern instruments, including the internet, social media and the principles of media simulation. They recognize that in a world dominated by spectacle, pictures and narratives frequently hold greater significance than material truth. Advanced propaganda videos, viral memes and the manipulation of media imagery serve as principal instruments in symbolic warfare.

Conversely, these movements counter postmodern relativism and pessimism by reaffirming absolute truths. They build holy narratives, grounded in religion, ethnicity or the nation-state, that dismiss the intricacies and uncertainties of the contemporary world. These narratives are frequently constructed through manufactured nostalgia, namely illusions of reverting to a "golden age" of purity, whether manifested as the Islamic Caliphate, a homogeneous ethnic nation, or a former empire. This mechanism's operation can be exemplified by two cases: the Islamic State (IS) and the emergence of nationalist populism.

IS exemplifies a quintessential case of postmodern extremism. It is not solely a military organization but a highly advanced media phenomenon. They provide a whole identity package through film production and social media marketing, namely involvement in a "Caliphate" that surpasses the confines of the nation-state. For numerous young Muslims in the West facing cultural alienation and an identity crisis, this proposition presents a definitive response to inquiries regarding selfhood.

Furthermore, IS presents significant gallantry. The apocalyptic war story elevates its participants from mundane persons to "heroes" inside a cosmic drama. Even the most egregious acts of violence are portrayed as noble sacrifices. In this situation, megalothymia manifests its most sinister form, as dramatic violence compels the world to recognize them as a formidable force.

In contrast, the emergence of nationalist populism globally, exemplified by personalities like Donald Trump in the United States, right-wing parties in Europe, and numerous ethno-nationalist movements, adheres to a comparable rationale, but with varying intensities. These movements galvanize communal megalothymia by pledging to "restore the nation's greatness." They contest global isothymia, including multiculturalism and universal human rights, by reaffirming assertions of national or racial dominance. These groups frequently utilize anti-establishment rhetoric while concurrently adopting the principles of postmodern media and spectacle. They acknowledge that in modern culture, attention constitutes the most important currency, and controversy serves as an effective method for obtaining it.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative methodology, applying Julia Kristeva's conceptual framework of abjection to examine the phenomena of religious fanaticism. The research is analytical and textual (Zulfiya 2024), concentrating on the deconstruction of violent rhetoric in extremist group narratives, namely through the examination of language, metaphors and symbols employed to rationalize violence against "the Other." The research data include both primary and secondary sources. The corpus consists of Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* as the primary theoretical text, whilst the secondary sources encompass literature on political psychoanalysis and research pertaining to religious fanaticism. This study also references textual examples derived from propaganda

narratives and the language of extremist organizations like IS, specifically with their employment of abjective terminology and symbols. Content analysis uses purposive, criterion-based text selection to enable deep interpretive analysis. Inclusion criteria required texts to engage with discourse, symbolism, identity formation, or the legitimisation of violence, while sources that were purely descriptive, policy-oriented, or non-scholarly were excluded. The terminology of “unclean,” “dirty,” or “corruptors of faith” in IS speech serves to vilify foreigners and to render targeted people as existential threats that must be eradicated. These narratives not only provide moral and religious justification for violence but also facilitate the construction of collective identity and address the psychosocial fears of adherents through symbolic processes that delineate “us” from “them.” This methodology is used since the notion of abjection is inherently psychological and symbolic (Kuckartz 2014), rendering it unsuitable for quantifiable testing. This study critically analyzes textual samples to elucidate how narratives of violence function as psychological mechanisms for reinforcing identity coherence in environments characterized by instability of meaning and religious authority. The analysis prioritises interpretive synthesis rather than quantification, enabling cross-case comparison of how similar abjective mechanisms recur across different religious and cultural contexts, thereby revealing shared psychological and symbolic patterns underlying extremist violence.

Theoretical Framework of Julia Kristeva’s Concept of Abjection

It is crucial to trace the roots of Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection in order to fully comprehend it. This section examines the theoretical framework, commencing with a concise biography of Kristeva that influenced her intellectual perspective, followed by a comprehensive elucidation of the concept of the “abject” and the process of “abjection.” The discourse thereafter examines the essential differentiation between the semiotic and symbolic modalities of language, alongside its correlation with psychoanalytic notions such as “The Real” in Jacques Lacan’s theory, phobia and *jouissance* (Olivier 2004). This paradigm is utilized to investigate the interplay between art and violence, specifically regarding ritual and the notion of catharsis, to assess how the potency of the abject is expressed and governed within cultural discourse.

A Brief Biography of Julia Kristeva

Julia Kristeva is a distinguished scholar whose oeuvre encompasses philosophy, linguistics, and literary studies. Born in Bulgaria in 1941, she shown a profound interest in language and culture from a young age. In 1965, she relocated to France to further her education, where in Paris she interacted with prominent intellectuals, including Roland Barthes, who subsequently significantly influenced her development as a feminist and psychoanalytic theorist (Balsam 2021; Downey 2020; Margaroni 2023). Her initial academic foundation was in structural linguistics, but her interests progressively deepened into psychoanalysis and philosophy.

Upon relocating to Paris in the 1960s, her intellectual perspective was profoundly changed by influential figures like Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida, who informed her understanding of subjectivity and language. Kristeva’s oeuvre is uniquely interdisciplinary, synthesizing several theoretical frameworks to produce innovative concepts. She thoroughly analysed the interplay between language, culture, and the development of human subjectivity. In addition to advancing previous ideas, Kristeva added other essential notions, notably abjection, which has significantly enriched contemporary philosophical discourse. Her seminal work, *Powers of Horror* (1982), illustrates a deep exploration of the interplay between language, culture, and the construction of subjectivity, serving as the cornerstone of her abjection theory. The concept of abjection originated from her exploration of identity limits, namely how individuals formulate the idea of the “self” by rejecting components deemed filthy, unpleasant or frightening, including death and animality (Kristeva & Lechte 1982; McCabe & Holmes 2011).

Definition of the Abject and Abjection

Kristeva (1982) introduces the concept of abjection as a theoretical framework for comprehending the ambivalence inherent in religious discourse, especially about the link between the sacred and the horrific. The abject denotes that which is repudiated both physically and psychologically, since it obscures the distinctions between self and non-self, life and death, purity and impurity. In Jacques Lacan's theory (Olivier 2004), *objet petit a* signifies the desired item one strives to have, but the abject represents a persistent threat that one works to eliminate, eliciting sensations of fear and revulsion. Examples encompass cadavers, excrement, blood, or other entities that evoke human corporeality and mortality.

Abjection, as defined by Kristeva, pertains to the act of rejection itself. It is a psychological mechanism by which individuals consistently reject undesirable things to maintain the perception of a cohesive and stable identity. A human corpse elicits fear as it confronts individuals with the truth of death, regarded as foreign yet existentially inseparable from the self. The human psyche is perpetually engaged in two concurrent cycles: the quest for that which is deemed to fulfil the self, symbolized by *objet petit a*, and the repudiation of elements perceived as jeopardizing the self's existence and stability, denoted by abjection (Rasheed & Jassim 2024).

The Semiotic and the Symbolic

Kristeva's concept of abjection explains how individuals instinctively evade stimuli that elicit profound revulsion, such as blood, feces or corpses, as these aspects evoke reminders of corporeal vulnerability and mortality. This repudiation of what is deemed "impure" paradoxically facilitates the creation of an illusion of a "clean" and organized identity. In this context, Kristeva (1982) differentiates between the semiotic and the symbolic. Semiotics pertains to the domain of instincts, emotions and disorder that exists beyond language, exemplified as the pre-linguistic emotional manifestations of a child. The symbolic, in contrast, pertains to the realm of order, language and regulations established by humans to organize existence, including religious doctrines and societal conventions that categorize entities as "sacred" or "impure."

Abjection manifests at the individual level when a newborn begins to detach from the mother, marking a traumatic moment in which the subject recognizes its existence as a separate entity. Kristeva (1982) characterizes this process as basic suppression, which underpins identity development (Oliver 2003). At the societal level, communities create rituals and taboos, such as restrictions against touching corpses, to emphasize distinctions between "humanity" and "animality." This division is fundamentally tenuous. The abject perpetually poses a threat of resurgence, exemplified by disease outbreaks or widespread violence that underscore the precariousness of civilization. Abjection transpires when chaotic semiotic elements, such as violence or primal desires, disrupt the established symbolic order. To maintain social order, civilizations classify specific actions or entities as "sinful," "impure," or "forbidden" for regulatory purposes.

The Real, Phobia and *Jouissance*

Kristeva (1982) associates abjection with the concept of "the Real" in Jacques Lacan's theory, referring to a realm beyond language that remains inexpressible. For instance, when a person discovers a corpse, they confront not just the abstract concept of death but also its tangible manifestations, like the odour, pallid skin and exposed wounds. This experience dismantles illusions of rationality and control, leading the individual to what Kristeva refers to as the threshold of existence. Thus, the corpse epitomizes the "apex of abjection," representing the most tangible representation of death as an inherent aspect of existence, while simultaneously being consistently repudiated (Pournami 2024).

The fear of the abject frequently presents as a phobia. Hemophobia, or the aversion to blood, is not merely a fear of the crimson fluid itself but a response to the connotations it embodies, including mortality and physical fragility. Simultaneously, abjection can elicit *jouissance*, a

paradoxical satisfaction stemming from the confrontation with the scary. This phenomenon is manifest in popular culture, particularly in horror films and in religious violence, where offenders are frequently enthralled by the aesthetics of blood and pain. Kristeva also cites literary works by authors such as Dostoevsky and Artaud, who investigate this gloomy enjoyment to reveal concealed aspects of human existence.

Art, Ritual and Catharsis

Kristeva (1982) argues that abjection does not inherently lead to disease but can be navigated through two principal cultural avenues: art and ritual. Art and literature turn experiences of disgust into attractive forms that evoke catharsis, changing semiotic disorder into symbolic significance. Meanwhile, religious ritual serves as a symbolic barrier that systematically manages the menace of the abject (Girard 2005). In religious traditions, sacrificial rites in the Old Testament convert blood, deemed biologically despicable into a hallowed vehicle for atonement. This symbolic framework is fundamentally weak. Kristeva (1982) asserts that in times of social or political upheaval, the significance of ritual can disintegrate and leading to the repurposing of the same symbols as rationalizations for violence exemplified by mass killings conducted under the disguise of religion.

The cathartic process operates when violence is directed into structured ritualistic forms, such as holy war defined by particular norms (Gentile 2013). When these mechanisms collapse, as evidenced in the Bosnian conflict or IS violence, aggression becomes uncontrolled. Under these circumstances, abjection ceases to function as a means of purification and instead transforms into a drive to repeat, specifically the repetition of violence to extract pleasure from misery, or *jouissance*. IS, for example, exploits abjection through propaganda movies of executions designed to inspire terror and sanctify misery and bloodshed. In this setting, violence ceases to be a method for establishing a new order and transforms into an aim in itself, epitomizing the most devastating type of *jouissance*.

Unlike violence, art provides a distinct avenue for catharsis. Kristeva, as examined by Pournami (2024), posits that literary works, like Kafka's writings and Baudelaire's poetry, investigate the realm of the abject without succumbing to actual violence. Art, via linguistic play and symbolic representation, unveils truths about human experience that religion or science cannot fully describe. In this context, art is viewed as the quintessential catharsis, the supreme form of purification that recognizes the existence of the abject while preventing its annihilation of mankind.

Abjection serves as a complicated psychosocial mechanism that elucidates the coexistence of violence and sanctity within religious discourse. Kristeva's theory highlights that attempts to cleanse the self by rejecting what is considered "dirty," "impure," or infecting can turn into violence when symbolic boundaries disintegrate. In today's world, when religiously motivated violence is prevalent, the theory of abjection provides a pertinent analytical framework for comprehending the interplay of power, identity and culture, alongside the necessity of pursuing non-repressive avenues for catharsis. The summary of Kristeva's theory of abjection was summarized in the Table 1.0 below.

Table 1.0 Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection

Aspect	Concept	Manifestation	Implications in the Religious Context
Definition of Abjection	A reaction of fear toward that which blurs the boundary between subject and object (self or <i>liyan</i>).	Corpses, blood, filth, open wounds.	Blood in sacrificial rituals, simultaneously sacred and repulsive.
Paradox of Abjection	Simultaneously rejected and desired (<i>jouissance</i>).	Pleasure in watching horror films or violent rituals.	Religious violence, such as IS executions, as a form of destructive <i>jouissance</i> .
Cathartic Function	Symbolic purification through ritual.	Animal sacrifice.	Stabilizes the social order by redirecting violence into controlled forms.
Risk of Violence	When cathartic mechanisms fail, abjection becomes uncontrolled violence.	Genocide, mass violence.	The legitimization of violence in the name of "purity".
Contemporary Application	Analysis of violence carried out in the name of religion.	Extremist groups.	Deconstruction of religious narratives that politicize abjection.

Results

Julia Kristeva's Theory of Abjection and Its Significance in Religious Extremism: A Multi-Case Analysis

The rise of religious extremism is intricately linked to the postmodern condition marked by meaning instability, identity fragility and an epistemological crisis. Within this context, religious fanaticism functions through mechanisms of abjection as theorized by Kristeva. Radical groups exploit these dynamics to create and strengthen exclusive and aggressive collective identities, primarily by rejecting and demonizing "the Other" as a threat that must be eradicated (Arya 2016).

Abjection in the postmodern setting encompasses not only the repudiation of conflicting ideas but also represents a psychological and existential process. Anxiety regarding the vulnerability of group identity, which is increasingly revealed in the context of postmodern epistemological uncertainty, is expressed through both symbolic and physical violence. In this context, violence serves as a symbolic rite of purification aimed at reinstating identity boundaries considered to be endangered. Consequently, acts of murder or oppression aimed at the abjected are not merely political but also signify psychological attempts to reinforce group identity in a context characterized by ambiguity of meaning and authority (Pellerin 2016).

Kristeva (1982) characterizes the abject as that which "transgresses borders, positions and rules" and which "disrupts identity, system and order." For her, abjection arises from the human sense of identity and underscores that identity development transpires through the establishment of boundaries between the self and the other. Any entity that exists beyond these parameters or contravenes them must be fundamentally eradicated, as it is regarded as a danger to the integrity of identity.

Abjection is conceptualized as a phenomenon located at the boundary between subject and object, one that is rejected yet cannot be fully removed from consciousness (Duschinsky 2013). This concept is particularly significant in discussions of identity politics, as it helps explain how group identities are formed, regulated and defended within social systems. Minority groups are

often positioned as abject, perceived as disruptions to social order and consequently excluded from public spaces. Such dynamics illustrate how abjection operates as a mechanism for maintaining social hierarchies and protecting dominant group identities from challenge or contestation.

Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection provides a critical framework for comprehending the psychological and cultural dynamics that underpin religious extremism. Abjection, according to Kristeva (1982), denotes something which is repudiated while concurrently possessing a compelling allure. In the realm of extremism, radical factions forge their collective identities through self-purification procedures by establishing abjected the others (Navaro-Yashin 2009). In this context, individuals or external groups with divergent opinions are perceived as impure elements that constitute a threat and must thus be eradicated. The rhetoric of ethnic or religious "cleansing" is often utilized to rationalize acts of violence.

Religious Extremist Discourses and the Expression of Abjection Among Extremist Groups

In the context of modern global warfare, religious extremist groups methodically create narratives that portray "the Other" as a menacing and repulsive thing. Employing Julia Kristeva's idea of abjection as an analytical framework, this psychological process can be interpreted as an endeavor to maintain a "pure" communal identity by rejecting and annihilating anything deemed impure. This article examines the operationalization of abjection techniques by extremist groups within several religious traditions, providing academic and legal data that reveals coherent narrative patterns despite varied theological contexts.

Mechanisms of Abjection in Islamic State (IS)

IS implements the notion of abjection in an exceptionally cruel fashion with its extermination of the Yazidi community. A United Nations report (2016) indicated that IS propaganda plainly stated the objective of "destroying" the Yazidis, accompanied by horrifying declarations such as "we will make your women slaves." These narratives not only depict violence but also systematically classify the Yazidis as "devil worshippers" who must be exterminated to sanitize IS-controlled land. The United Nations (2016) expressly confirmed that IS's declarations and actions fulfil the criteria for genocide. Stern and Berger (2015) examine IS's utilization of apocalyptic narratives to rationalize mass killings as a form of "purification," whereas Ingram (2016) illustrates that IS media consistently depicts minority groups as "impure" or abject entities that tarnish the true Islam.

Religious Nationalism and Abjection in Jewish Extremism

The Kach movement led by Meir Kahane developed narratives that equated Arabs with a "cancer" that must be removed from the "body" of the Jewish nation (Sprinzak 1991). The story of abjection culminated in the 1994 Cave of the Patriarchs massacre, perpetrated by Baruch Goldstein, who regarded the murder of 29 Palestinian Muslims as a kind of "purification" of a sacred location. Sprinzak (1991) meticulously illustrates how Kahane's language established a definitive distinction between a "pure" Jewish identity and an "impure" Arab. The Guardian (2020) and Khalek (2015) document the persistence of this narrative in extremist settler violence, exemplified by chants of "death to Arabs" during the fire attack that resulted in the deaths of the Dawabsha family. Pedahzur and Perliger (2004) illustrate how this violence is characterized as "existential self-defense" in Jewish extremist discourses.

Millenarianism and Ethnic Cleansing in Christian Extremism

In Christian contexts, mechanisms of abjection manifest in two unique yet equally destructive forms. Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), crafted a narrative that fused violence with apocalyptic ideologies. Documents from the International Criminal Court (2005)

detail how Kony utilized the Ten Commandments to rationalize mass executions and mutilations, claiming that those who defied “God’s commands” must be eradicated.

In Bosnia, Radovan Karadžić explicitly stated the objective of “eliminating Bosnian Muslims from the face of the earth” (International Criminal Court 2005). This statement was implemented during the Srebrenica massacre, where some 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were murdered as part of an “ethnic cleansing” campaign. The International Court of Justice officially recognized the Bosnian genocide and documented the central role of ethno-religious narratives in the violence. In this context, Gagnon (2004) elucidates how Serbian elites utilized Orthodox Christian symbols to validate nationalist initiatives.

Buddhist Nationalism and the Reconstruction of Ethnic “Purity”

In Myanmar, monk Wirathu of the 969 movement described Rohingya Muslims as “venomous snakes” that require “cleansing” (United Nations 2025). This account of abjection was utilized to rationalize military actions that the United Nations has evaluated as demonstrating genocidal intent. Gnanasara Thero, leader of Bodu Bala Sena in Sri Lanka, explicitly denied Muslim rights by asserting, “we will not allow Muslims to take over this Buddhist country” (Colombage 2014). Numerous scholarly research and government documents have demonstrated how “demographic threat” narratives are employed to justify violence against the Rohingya (Hamzah et al. 2016; Larasati & Munabari 2018). Walton and Hayward (2014) illustrate how Buddhist nationalism formulates a concept of “purity” that necessitates protection against perceived “contamination” by minority groups.

Extremist factions from various religions demonstrate strikingly analogous narrative structures in their utilization of abjection processes. The initial pattern is seen in the formulation of existential threats, as IS characterizes the Yazidis as “devil worshippers,” Kach equates Arabs with “cancer,” Serbian nationalists represent Bosnian Muslims as “pollutants,” and Bodu Bala Sena depicts Muslims as “demographic invaders.”

The second tendency manifests through the employment of biological metaphors for dehumanization, utilizing sickness terminology like “cancer” or “virus,” animal imagery such as “venomous snakes,” and contamination vocabulary such “impure” or “polluting” as persistent rhetorical techniques. The third pattern is evident in violence characterized as ritual purification, when mass killings are depicted as “cleansing,” genocide as the “removal of cancer,” and expulsions as the “restoration of sacred order.” Despite variations in theological context, religious extremist tales have a shared psychological framework characterized by the systematic dehumanization that engenders the abject. Academic and legal sources indicate that these narratives are not solely rhetorical but serve as operational underpinnings for crimes against humanity.

Discussion

This study explores the complex relationship between the concept of abjection and the phenomenon of religious extremism thru a comprehensive and interdisciplinary philosophical approach. In-depth analytical findings reveal that abjection is not merely a spontaneous reaction to elements considered disgusting or repulsive, but rather a deep and complex psychosocial mechanism underlying the formation of extreme thought patterns and actions. In this context, abjection serves as a psychological foundation that strengthens collective identity by establishing boundaries thru the rejection of the systematically abjected ‘other’.

This discovery is highly significant because it opens new horizons in understanding the dynamics of religious extremism formation from a rarely explored angle, namely thru emotional structures and existential reactions to disorder and threats to identity. In the current context, the phenomenon of abjection is becoming increasingly alarming with the emergence of social media and digital platforms that accelerate the spread of extreme narratives and the visualization of abjectified violence (Binder & Kenyon 2022). It’s important to note that the global figures on religiously motivated violence and lone-actor attacks that are mentioned here are not meant to

be direct evidence linking abjection to specific death tolls or attack frequencies. For example, there are an average of 8,000 to 10,000 deaths each year and a 60% rise in lone-wolf extremist attacks. Study by Etumnu and William-Etumnu (2023) confirms that social media now serves as the primary space for the dissemination of abject violent esthetics, while Zogby's (2023) findings emphasize that socioeconomic instability and social isolation make individuals more susceptible to the allure of the abject. This phenomenon is further exacerbated by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which increases reliance on virtual space and reduces physical social interaction.

In the context of theoretical interpretation, the extreme manifestations of religious extremism based on abjection can be understood thru four stages of psychosocial development, as adapted from Kristeva's framework (1982). The first stage involves individuals with loose and easily formed identity boundaries; the second stage refers to the process of identity formation thru rejection of the abjected element; the third stage encompasses individuals who have solidified their identity thru deep mechanisms of abjection; while the fourth stage involves groups who are fully immersed in the cycle of *jouissance* of violence, that is, the sadistic pleasure derived from the suffering of the 'other'. The study done by Samoh and Taher (2021) in Southern Thailand confirms this model by illustrating how abjection can transform into a prevailing ideological framework that justifies violence, without suggesting that all types of extremism advance uniformly through these phases.

The discussion of Islamic State (IS) and Buddhist nationalism is enhanced by the availability of comprehensive intellectual, legal and institutional data, which facilitates a clearer depiction of objective mechanisms in speech and practice. In contrast, the instances of Hindu and Jewish extremism are included as comparative examples to illustrate the cross-religious recurrence of analogous symbolic patterns, rather than to provide comprehensive case analysis. This disparity indicates variations in data accessibility and documentation, rather than a hierarchical assessment of extreme severity or importance. In all instances, the same underlying logic of abjection is evident in the formulation of existential threats, dehumanizing metaphors and tales of cleansing.

The reflection on the findings of this study should be viewed within the framework of previous research that also explored the relationship between mechanisms of abjection and the formation of extreme ideology. Eraliev (2022), in his analysis of religious extremism, asserts that complex mechanisms of abjection serve as a primary factor in the construction of extremist cognitive structures. This discovery aligns with A.N.'s argument. Guiora (2009), who found that the inability of individuals or groups to manage abject elements in religious experience often leads to harsh, exclusive and intolerant interpretations. At the domestic level, the study by Awang et al. (2023) found that the low level of awareness of rejection mechanisms among highly educated youth in Malaysia is one of the contributing factors to their vulnerability to extremist ideologies.

This phenomenon, according to Julia Kristeva's (1982) theoretical framework, demonstrates a crisis of the symbolic order in post-modern society, which fails to balance the sacred and the profane, the accepted and the rejected. Smith (2000) reinforces this interpretation by showing that the process of individual and collective identity formation is often built thru rejection of the abject. In a more critical tone, Timothy O. Inman (2017) reveals how this mechanism can manifest a form of pleasure in violence, a narrative often exploited by extremist movements in building the appeal of their ideology. Meanwhile, Mills (2022) expands the scope of this understanding thru the concept of "global abjection," which emphasizes how international political and economic power structures also play a role in institutionalizing the process of abjection against marginalized groups.

Thru the synthesis of findings from various studies, several strategic recommendations can be outlined to address extremism rooted in mechanisms of abjection. First, it is necessary to create an educational curriculum that integrates aspects of understanding the psychology of rejection, particularly in religious and moral education. Second, higher education institutions and religious leadership must strengthen constructive and empathetic narratives in addressing

'disgusting' or 'marginalized' experiences. Third, deradicalization programs must be revamped to include a psychosocial dimension that explains how abjection plays a role in influencing radical actions. Fourth, dialog between ethnic and religious groups must be empowered to overcome the stigmatization resulting from mechanisms of objectification. Fifth, the application of universal human values and an inclusive approach need to be strengthened at all policy levels. Lastly, in order to stop the propagation of violent narratives and extremist aesthetics online, digital literacy needs to be raised.

Overall, a holistic approach that considers the psychological, cultural and power structure dimensions within the mechanism of abjection is crucial for unravelling the roots of religious extremism and building a more balanced and inclusive society emotionally, symbolically and socially. Table 1.1 below explains the mechanisms of abjection found in religious extremism.

Table 1.1 Mechanisms of Abjection in Religious Extremism

Analysis Aspect	Explanation	Example of Extreme Phenomena	Socio-Political Implications
Formation of Collective Identity	Abjection is used to build a "us vs. them" boundary by creating an enemy considered unclean (abject).	Labelling other groups as "infidels" or "unclean" who must be destroyed	Legitimization of violence in the name of purifying group identity.
Sacralization of Violence	Violence is transformed into a sacred ritual thru abject aesthetics (blood, corpses).	IS propaganda videos featuring bloody executions with jihad narratives.	Violence is no longer a medium, but becomes the sacred goal itself.
Psychology of <i>Jouissance</i>	Paradoxical pleasure (<i>jouissance</i>) in the face of the terrifying becomes a driver of extreme action.	Extremists' fascination with images of violence and death in recruitment.	Trapped in a cycle of violence that continuously repeats (repetition compulsion).
Sacred-Profane Ambivalence	The sacred (God's command) and the disgusting (violence) become inseparable.	Murder in the name of religion, considered both holy and terrifying.	Society finds it difficult to resist because violence has been given transcendental legitimacy.
Failure of Ritual Catharsis	Traditional catharsis mechanisms (such as rituals) fail, causing abjection to explode as terror.	Suicide bombings as a form of "sacrifice" that fails to become symbolic catharsis.	Violence loses its ritual meaning and becomes purely destructive.

Conclusion

Based on an in-depth analysis using Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, it can be concluded that religious extremism operates thru complex psychosocial mechanisms where radical groups form a collective identity by creating the 'other' as an abjected entity, that is considered disgusting, dirty and threatening to the purity of religious values. This process of objectification is manifested in extremist narratives such as IS labeling Yazidis as "devil worshippers," radical Buddhist movements in Myanmar equating Rohingya with "germs," and the Kach group describing Arabs as "cancer" that must be eradicated. The violence committed was not merely a political strategy, but a symbolic ritual to assert collective identity thru the destruction of elements considered impure, driven by the concept of *jouissance* which describes as paradoxical pleasure in the face of the terrifying.

This study aims to contribute theoretical insights to the research on religious extremism by offering Kristeva's psychoanalytic perspective, which has been limited in its application until now. Through an abjection approach, this research successfully uncovers deeper psychological dimensions of the phenomenon of radicalism, particularly how the mechanism of identity formation through rejection of 'the other' plays a role in triggering violence in the name of religion. The findings of this study can enrich existing deradicalization approaches by providing a more holistic understanding of the psychosocial roots of extremism, while also opening up space for the development of more comprehensive prevention strategies, future empirical studies could employ qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, digital ethnography or discourse analysis of online extremist communities that consider the emotional, symbolic and existential aspects that may have been overlooked in conventional analyses.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Author's Contributions

1. **Ahmad Munawar Ismail:** contributed to conceptualization, methodology, supervision, and manuscript review and editing.
2. **Mohd Farhan Firas:** contributed to data analysis, interpretation, and original draft preparation. Both authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study.

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