

## Feminist Body Horror and Abjection in *Black Christmas* (2019) (Keseraman Badan Feminis dan Konsep Kekejian (Abjection) di dalam filem *Black Christmas* (2019))

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### ABSTRACT

*The article investigates the ways in which feminist body horror, abjection, and the female gaze transform the slasher horror film genre through the feminist remake of Black Christmas, directed by Sophia Takal in 2019. By re-framing the slasher narrative through the story of Mu Kappa Epsilon (MKE) sorority's fight against the Delta Kappa Omicron (DKO) fraternity and their eventual victory over the fraternity, Takal's remake of Black Christmas exposes toxic masculinity and highlights female empowerment and truth-telling. The film subverts and reconstructs the narrative of traditional slasher movies, thus raising questions pertaining to the objectification of female characters and attempts to critique social norms related to gender and power, thereby encouraging female characters to regain autonomy and break up male-centred narratives in traditional horror films. This analysis of Black Christmas (2019) delves into the role of feminist horror films in challenging gender inequality and subverting traditional social norms. This research highlights the importance of a feminist critical re-interpretation of films in the slasher genre which have a tendency of being exploitative. The implication of this research is that 21<sup>st</sup> century women horror directors escalate the transformation of the aesthetics of horror by utilising the female gaze in their cinematic treatments of the slasher genre, thereby inviting newer angles to the ongoing discourse of gender stereotypes in the genre.*

*Keywords: Feminist Body Horror; Abjection; Body Horror; Female Gaze; Gaze Theory*

### ABSTRAK

*Article ini menyiasat keseraman badan feminis, konsep kekejian (abjection) dan perspektif (pandangan) wanita mentransformasikan genre filem seram "slasher" melalui pengolahan semula feminis filem Black Christmas yang diarahkan oleh Sophia Takal pada 2019. Dengan merangka semula naratif slasher melalui kisah perjuangan pertubuhan perempuan Mu Kappa Epsilon (MKE) menentang persaudaraan Delta Kappa Omicron (DKO) dan kemenangan akhir mereka ke atas persaudaraan tersebut, pengolahan semula Black Christmas oleh Takal mendedahkan sikap toksik kejantanan serta menyerlahkan pemerksaan wanita dan pemberitahuan kebenaran. Filem ini menumbangkan dan membina semula naratif filem slasher tradisional, sekaligus menimbulkan persoalan yang berkaitan dengan objektifikasi watak wanita. Di dalam masa yang sama Takal mengkritik norma sosial yang berkaitan dengan jantina dan kuasa, sekaligus menggalakkan autonomi dipulangkan kepada watak wanita untuk memecahkan naratif berpusatkan lelaki dalam filem seram tradisional. Analisis filem Black Christmas (2019) ini menyelidiki peranan filem seram feminis dalam mencabar ketidaksamaan jantina di dalam norma-norma genre filem tersebut. Penyelidikan ini menyerlahkan kepentingan penafsiran semula secara kritis feminis terhadap filem dalam genre slasher yang mempunyai kecenderungan untuk mengeksploitasi wanita. Implikasi penyelidikan ini ialah pengarah filem seram wanita abad ke-21 berpotensi meningkatkan transformasi estetika seram dengan menggunakan renungan wanita dalam prosedur sinematik mereka bagi genre slasher, dengan itu mengundang perspektif yang lebih baharu kepada wacana stereotaip jantina yang berterusan dalam genre tersebut.*

*Kata Kunci: Keseraman Badan Feminis; Konsep Kekejian (Abjection); Keseraman Badan; Renungan Wanita; Teori Renungan*

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## INTRODUCTION

Women have been historically objectified in the horror film genre whether they are portrayed as the victim, the final girl, or the monster. Carol J. Clover (1992) who introduced the term “Final Girl” into the study of horror films observes that slasher movies often became the site of exploitation of women’s bodies (p.23). This article contends that the new wave of horror films by women directors in the 21st century is therefore crucial in subverting patriarchal norms through the challenging of horror paradigms and tropes. Pursuantly, an interrogation of the approach of these directors through an application of abjection, body horror and the female gaze will reveal the evolution of horror cinema in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A fairly recent example is Sophia Takal’s feminist revisioning of the slasher horror classic *Black Christmas* in 2019. Takal’s *Black Christmas* (2019) is adapted from the 1974 version which was also adapted in 2006 prior to Takal’s version. The female gaze has grown as an approach to analysing movies and arose as a counterpoint to what Laura Mulvey accurately identified as “The Male Gaze”. Alicia Malone (2018) for example, edited a collection with analysis of movies made by women that exemplified the female gaze, looking at women directors such as Agnes Varda to identify the ways in which the female gaze empowered the feminine image and experience in those movies. Takal’s re-envisioning of *Black Christmas* (2019) empowers the feminine body and removes objectification as a central point of horror in the movie. Focusing on jump scares and more subtle exemplifications of body horror and abjection, Takal’s direction showcases examples of toxic masculinity within American academic institutions and juxtaposes that against more positive forms of masculinity as well as solidarity amongst the women in the movie.

The 2019 version of *Black Christmas* is set in an American university and tells the story of the Mu Kappa Epsilon (MKE) sorority whose members are repeatedly hurt, violated, and slaughtered by the Delta Kappa Omicron (DKO) fraternity, and the ways in which the members of MKE enact autonomy and fight against the onslaught by the DKO attackers. As such, *Black Christmas* (2019) explores the themes related to toxic masculinity and women’s empowerment through conflicted relationships between the MKE sorority and the DKO fraternity. The perspective of an African American woman, Kris, is also analysed to highlight the role of complex intersecting identities in creating the character's experience and the challenges they may face in the struggle against not just patriarchal violence but white supremacy in a highly racialized atmosphere. The film is notable for its critique of patriarchal social norms and portrayal of empowered female characters who break patriarchal oppression. The outcome of this research is expected to contribute to a broader discussion of feminist horror films and the resolution of gender issues in contemporary horror cinema and what it signifies for the slasher genre of horror movies in the twenty-first century.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### THE PROBLEMATIC AESTHETICS OF HORROR AND THE SLASHER GENRE

Although the slasher film subgenre may be connected to the Italian *giallo* cinema, in terms of the genesis of the horror subgenre in Anglophone cinema, the Canadian *Black Christmas* (1974) has been reported by various film scholars as the first of its kind, before the more popular films such as *Halloween* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. One of the predominant aspects of the related genres of *giallo* and slasher movies is the objectifying and victimizing of women; women are the primary

victims in most of these movies. The giallo genre is also notable for insights into the “mechanics of crime and punishment” (Maitland McDonagh, 1987, p.5) and these elements may also be discerned in Takal’s version of *Black Christmas*.

Ahmed Atay (2023) compares the 2019 iteration of *Black Christmas* to the 1974 and 2006 version, noting that the 2019 revision of the previous versions softens and humanizes the interior of the sorority house which in turn humanizes the victims. Takal’s direction repositions women in the 2019 remake as not just victims but as characters with autonomy and agency. Atay (2023) considers that the biggest feature of Takal’s remake of *Black Christmas* is the integration of black magic into the film to drive home the point about patriarchal dominance. Takal positions the DKO fraternity as a collective of masked murderers which brings home the fact that these atrocities are the actions of not just one person but that of an entire group. In so doing, Takal highlights the ways in which these murderers are the ideological representation of toxic masculinity whilst also juxtaposing them against the more positive versions of masculinity in the form of male allies. Meanwhile, Takal also criticizes the sexist structure in American universities through the representation of fraternity culture in the film, which includes assault, rape, objectification of women, and other forms of violence against women.

From the perspective of the aesthetics of horror, Woodcock (2023) briefly explores the features of Takal’s film production based on Stoner’s (2020) analysis of the aesthetic appeal of horror films, particularly those related to violence. Stoner (2020) believes that audiences are attracted to horror films because they want to experience fear, suspense, disgust, and sympathy in a socially and morally acceptable way. However, Woodcock (2023) points to directors such as Takal as examples to rebut Stoner’s perspective on audience reception to horror which Woodcock finds problematic (p.217). In fact, Woodcock avers that objectification and minimalizing occurs in horror film such as slasher films, and therefore if one would follow Stoner’s postulate, then the careful work done by women directors such as Kusama, Kent, and Takal are “mistaken if they take the time to present horrific material in specific ways they consider to be socially responsible” (2023, p.217). Woodcock therefore refutes Stoner’s opinion that every horror film is defensible (2023, p.217). Woodcock’s (2023) work is essential to consider the ways in which directors such as Takal reposition women and the marginalised in their horror narratives (p.219).

Although the studies on *Black Christmas* (2019) are limited, the available research still provides valuable insights. One such perspective highlighted by this article is that the work done by women directors go a long way in challenging outdated and sexist assumptions in relation to common tropes in the genre. Even figures in the slasher genre such as the Final Girl who are seemingly empowered, are not necessarily so through the lens of the male gaze. In slasher movies such as the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series there are also a fair number of Final Girls which begs a different kind of nuanced discourse. Kyle Christensen (2011) points out that there are some misconceptions about the Final Girl (p.24). Namely, Christensen (2011) invokes Clover’s research which notes that the Final Girl gains empowerment simply because she follows the masculine construct of heroism and is herself then made masculine (p.27). In relation to the special status of the Final Girl, Warren (2025) writes that her “bravery is as important as her purity”, thus centring male desire and performing heroism for the “gratification” of an implied male audience (p.1). Therefore, as Christensen (2011) points out, rather than being a point of solidarity, the Final Girl “achieves a kind of genuine masculine strength” juxtaposed against the killer “with his faux hypermasculinity” (p.26) which raises the question of whether the Final Girl is a feminist or an anti-feminist trope. This article therefore contends that younger women filmmakers such as Takal answer that question creating multiple Final Girls working in solidarity with each other to reclaim

the narrative of slasher movies through communal empowerment rather than through solitary heroic action.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article adopts qualitative research methods. The perspectives of abjection, and the female gaze will be applied to analyse the visual text. In particular, this research deploys the aesthetics of body horror and abjection, as well as the female gaze to explore the dilemma that diverse identities bring to women and the ways in which the representations of these identities in the horror genre go further in enriching the discourse within these movies instead of weakening them. The article will analyse *Black Christmas* (2019) as a visual text by through an interrogation of scene visuals, movie lines, director's position and perspectives. Furthermore, through a comprehensive review of the film's themes and narrative structure to explore the ways in which *Black Christmas* (2019) uses body horror and abjection through the female gaze to depict the inequities in patriarchal, white supremacist educational institutions.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### CONTEXTUALISING ABJECTION

The theoretical framework is based on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection through the lens of the female gaze. Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) connects abjection to the deterioration and the transformational force of submission on the female body. The theory of abjection is centred on human reactions of disgust and abhorrence when confronted with something that is considered taboo, or outside the norms of society. As a term, abjection goes beyond these emotions and is several levels more intense than a surface feeling of disgust. Specifically, the concept of abjection may be understood in two aspects, which are the symbolic and the physical. From the physical perspective, abjection is related to the boundaries of the body. It is triggered when people are confronted with the body's waste, blood, and some additional elements that serve as a reminder of human mortality and physical functions. In relation to symbolism, abjection may be associated with social and cultural norms. Kristeva's writings on abjection offer a viewpoint that may be useful in comprehending the humiliation connected to the feminine body. Abjection is primarily used to explore the horror imagery in the film that symbolizes the social fear and anxiety associated with women's bodies and autonomy. This article's analysis of abjection in *Black Christmas* (2019) focuses on the destruction of the integrity of a woman's body, thereby emphasizing the societal abjection they experience.

From a feminist perspective, women's body has been exploited to depict horror and abjection in horror films particularly considering their gynaecological functions. The image of the monstrous feminine in horror movies fixated on a woman's reproductive and parenting role may be interrogated through the deployment of Kristeva's theory (1982) of abjection as a key conceptual framework. Kristeva's theory (1982) is particularly significant within the context of women's body horror since it examines the intricate interactions between social institutions, feminine biological functions, and horror. Harrington (2017) redefines the concept of female body horror as "Gynaehorror" and offers a more fleshed-out explanation of the connection between body horror and abjection. 'Gynae' originates from a Greek word for woman (γυνή). In the English

language, Gynae is related to women's reproductive functions and bodies in a biological sense. For instance, gynaecology focuses on the reproductive system, encompassing the vagina, ovaries, and uterus, as well as issues like fertility, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, menstruation, menopause, and fertility cessation. Gynaehorror may therefore be categorized as a subsection of body horror that refers specifically to those assigned as female at birth. Gynaehorror may also be regarded as a method of expression and investigation that uses the narrative and aesthetic horrors of reproduction, motherhood, and sexuality to expose the underlying causes of women's social, political, and philosophical othering.

Although women's body as the abject is not explicitly depicted in Takal's sensitive and discreet remake of *Black Christmas*, it is implied in the ways in which the DKO fraternity view and treat women. There is also the quality of the black slime which inhabits these men, re-positioning the concept of abjection in relation to bodily fluids from the feminine to the masculine. The miasma of the oozing substances that render the DKO undergraduates' evil may then be read as a subtle aspect of body horror.

#### BODY HORROR

Xavier Aldana Reyes (2016) notes that horror is a genre which includes "the traumas we bury in the most inscrutable recesses of our mind" (p.11). Body horror is a subset of the horror genre that specifically relates to the more corporeal manifestations of psychic trauma. Of body horror, Reyes (2014) writes that it has been greatly conflated either with splatter or "gore cinema" or with the works of David Cronenberg (p.54). However, Reyes argues, the excessive nature of body horror can tip one over from fear to laughter (p.56) and this aspect of ridiculousness should also be considered in any analysis. There is a sense of transgression in body horror. Brophy (1986) argues that the invocation and infliction of fear in horror films is often closely related to the nature of the human body. Thus, through the study of Cronenberg's filmic works, Brophy emphasizes that the development of horror cinema has gradually shifted from the fear of death to the fear of the human body, especially the destruction and deformation of the human body in horror films. Body horror usually manifests itself in the manipulation and distortion of normal human form and function. For instance, the employment of anatomically improper limb positions and strange movements to create "monsters" out of diverse objects, including human body parts. These horror scenes are essentially showing the invasion and damage of the human body. Consequently, body horror movies are also known as "body rebellion films" (Cruz, 2012). As early as the late 19th and early 20th centuries, writers such as Mary Shelley and Edgar Allan Poe had already explored the related themes of body deformation and decay in their works, especially in Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). It is often regarded as a seminal work on body horror, which mainly shows the unnatural scientific experiments on the human body's horrible deformation.

Commenting on the performance art of Orlan, Fred Botting writes that the impact of "suspense, terror, anxiety and shock" as well as the "subsequent reactions like revulsion or the aversion of eyes" that Orlan's work engenders can also be found in horror cinema as it "cuts up bodies and simultaneously assaults the eyes of the audience" (p.139). The visual assault mentioned by Botting is very much part of the body horror experience but these aspects from a feminist perspective will change particularly when combined with a deep sense of abjection. In this article, this intersection is interrogated within the context of the female gaze and the way in which it modifies the perception of body horror in slasher films by women directors such as Takal.

## CONTEXTUALISING THE FEMALE GAZE

A major analytical procedure in this article is that of the female gaze. Susan R. Bowers, one of the earliest scholars utilizing the female gaze in writing about the depiction of Medusa's "mythical image" across history notes that this depiction is often an "abuse of female eros by the male gaze" (1990, p.217). Bowers (1990) writes that the "male scholar who sees joy and excitement in the depiction of a woman's mutilation and murder participates with the murderer in the defamation and attempted destruction" of feminine autonomy (p.218). The shifting of focus from the male gaze to the female gaze in slasher flicks by directors such as Takal is therefore important. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey (1975) offers a feminist interpretation of the gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". Mulvey (1975) articulates that cinema is a tool for masculine spectatorship and even claims that the cinematic equipment, including the camera, darkened theatres, and other viewing habits, even the gaze is gendered, especially when the viewer is male, and women on screen are often seen as sexual objects that provide pleasure. The male gaze refers to the objectification of women by cameras, which approach sexualizes and degrades women. It can be realized that the film industry is usually dominated by males, which makes them unavoidably create depictions of women from a masculine point of view, that is the reason why mainstream films attract the "male gaze". Mulvey (1975) quoted Freud's psychoanalytic theory to analyse the pleasure that people have when watching a movie, which comes from "scopophilia", or it can be called a voyeuristic gaze. Mulvey explained that the dimmed auditorium creates a private space for the audience, which helps the audience to have a sense of voyeurism and hallucinations, which allows them to enjoy the movie to the fullest. The subject of "scopophilia" is usually male, while the object is female. The male projects their fantasies and desires onto the female, taking pleasure in gazing. The "male gaze" is not just a simple "look"; power and desire are hidden behind the action. What it shows is that the woman as the object is controlled by the male who is the subject, which makes women become objects of consumption, and lose their independence and subjectivity in a patriarchal society.

In reaction to the theory of the male gaze, the theory of the female gaze became essential to interrogate and reposition the dialectics of the male gaze. Bowers (1990) writes that as an "antidote to the male gaze" there should be a female gaze in which women learn "to see clearly for themselves, thus reconstructing traditional male images of women" (p.218). The fundamental purpose of the female gaze is to present the content of the footage from a woman's point of view, thus transforming the woman from an object identity in front of the camera to a subject identity behind the camera. As opposed to the male gaze, the visual pleasure of the female gaze does not come from voyeurism, masochism, or objectification, but through the feminine perspective. This is an effective way for women to build their sense of self. In addition, it contests the male-dominated narrative structures in movies and other visual media to recover the power of female viewers and female filmmakers. According to female gaze theory, women have a unique perspective on the ways in which the world works and how to consume information. The significance of women's viewpoints, desires, and experiences in influencing visual culture is emphasized. It implies that women can use their gaze to challenge and subvert conventional gender roles and stereotypes. As a result, the female gaze changes the clichés of horror films, which transformed the focus from objectifying and persecuting women to exploring their feelings and experiences, to help women rebuild after experiencing trauma and abjection, and to become empowered. It is therefore important to situate the discussion of *Black Christmas* (2019) through the lens of the female gaze to better facilitate an understanding of the lineaments of the abject and of body horror in the movie.

## DISCUSSION

### BODY HORROR, ABJECTION AND TRANSFORMATION IN *BLACK CHRISTMAS* (2019)

Reyes (2014) writes that the human body is “inherently interstitial and largely operates without our express cognitive control (p.55). The representations of body horror may be divided into two forms, which are the external and internal transformations of the human body. The former refers to the physical transformation of body form, and the latter concerns psychological transformations. The representation of physical transformation is concentrated in the violent scenes in *Black Christmas* (2019) targeted at women’s body and usually involving body mutilation. For example, at the beginning of the film, a member of the DKO fraternity stabbed Lindsay violently with an icicle. Then, the killer disposed of Lindsey's body and left her body in the darkness like discarded garbage. The utter objectification and abjection of Lindsey’s body is therefore a key facet of this scene. Similarly, the death of Mu Kappa Epsilon sorority girls also shows a change in physical status, such as Franny who died on the balcony, and Jesse who died in the utility room. The physical transformation breaks down the boundary between life and death, and arouses the fear of sudden physical state changes, which is at the core of abjection. Finally, in the fight between Mu Kappa Epsilon sorority and the DKO fraternity, the human body is constantly mutilated by others. The footage visually shows bleeding wounds and abandoned corpses, which emphasizes the human body’s vulnerability and destructiveness and also causes feelings of rejection and disgust. The theory of abjection is reflected here in the depiction of mutilation and in the abandoned corpses.

Tim Posada (2020) writes of the ways in which female sexuality is punished in the horror genre and expounds on the “rape-revenge” film which places it “agreeably in horror’s longstanding tradition of torturing female bodies” (p.189). There is a danger then, of the very horrific act of rape which tends to present itself in horror films. For instance, Riley's rape, which is repeatedly mentioned in the film, also refers to another form of physical horror, embodied in the fear caused by physical assault. But the horror caused by this act in the film is narrated through the female gaze and therefore abjection is rendered in a more psychological context. Both the physical mutilation mentioned above, and the rape mentioned later actually represent the destruction of the integrity of the body, which can be seen as another specific manifestation of body horror and the abnormal sense and the movie accurately deals with the psychological trauma and the undoing of the sense of self because of that trauma. This inversion and undoing of the sense of self is therefore a different form of abjection which is represented in *Black Christmas*. Rather than objectifying the woman as a victim, the story reveals the ways in which she reclaims herself after that self is debased and undone. Therefore, as with *Revenge*, which Posada (2020) highlights in his article, *Black Christmas* (2019) can arguably also be considered a #MeToo movie.

Internal transformation can also have a negative after-effect, as can be seen in the case of the sorority sister, Helena who becomes an agent of the patriarchal institution. Riley gives Helena a comb that had been passed down from Mu to Mu for generations. She said that it is only for sisters with courage. However, Helena eventually betrays the MKE sorority and submits to the DKO fraternity's rule. She is convinced that women should take their rightful place behind men. For Helena, it seems easier to obey men than to fight against male power. Helena's psychological transformation causes her to lose control of her body and her mind, she becomes a puppet controlled by the dark arts of the DKO and then joins a plot to hurt her friends. Helena's actions blur the boundaries of morality and reveal the more insidious and non-physical ways in which abjection takes root. Furthermore, the DKO fraternity's use of dark art to manipulate Helena

symbolizes patriarchal control over women's bodies; Helena represents a group of women in a patriarchal society who are used to being submissive and not willing to resist. Therefore, they become willing agents of the patriarchy and are complicit in the subduing of their sorority sisters.

In addition to the transformations mentioned above, the film also mentions supernatural physical transformations. The film begins with a shot of the DKO fraternity's initiation ceremony. Those who wanted to join had to swear allegiance to the patriarchy and apply a strange black slime to their foreheads. It will turn the oath-taker into a bigoted and cold-blooded monster who has the only goal of killing sorority girls. Then they carried out a ritual killing of sorority girls under Professor Gelson's leadership, which means that men's violence against women is becoming systematic and institutionalized. The scene that best illustrates this point is that Professor Gelson has said that he wants to build an army of young men to consolidate the patriarchy and white supremacists. He even wants to put his army venture into courtrooms, boardrooms, and the halls of Congress to set the world right. This scene therefore highlights the agenda of conservative toxic masculinity and invokes Clover's (1992) "The Terrible Place"; the DKO fraternity house may be seen as the ultimate site of horror within the context of the slasher-verse (pp.30-31).

#### FEMALE GAZE IN *BLACK CHRISTMAS* (2019)

The fundamental purpose of the female gaze is to represent actions, interactions and experiences from the woman's perspective and to build feminine consciousness and autonomy and this may be discerned in *Black Christmas* (2019). The narrative is based on the perspective of the heroine Riley, aiming to subvert the expression of sexual violence in traditional horror films. In traditionally male-dominated films, directors always shoot scenes of sexual assault in a very explicit way, especially presenting women's expressions of pain, cries of anguish, and women's naked bodies. These films glorify horrific scenes, such as how much the victim's clothes be torn to sexually objectify them, the ways in which the camera should shoot the sexual intercourse position to make the rape scene more realistic, etc. Such camera expression is essentially to attract male viewers and satisfy their voyeuristic desires. The way that the sexual assault scenes are filmed makes the sexual violence experienced by female victims a selling point for films that appeal to male audiences. However, in *Black Christmas* (2019), the director deploys only fragmentary scenes and lines to imply that Riley had been raped by Brian Huntley, instead of sexualizing and objectifying women. Most notably, Takal does not utilise shaky camera footage nor is there any gratuitous nude footage. Takal only used short scenes of struggle and emotional changes to reflect Riley's trauma after being raped. The core of the whole story is to show the process of Riley's self-healing and resistance, which emphasizes that female characters are no longer victims in horror films, but brave resisters. In the beginning of the film, Riley lived in pain and fear after being sexually assaulted, rendering her afraid to face her abuser and his friends. She has been trying to escape reality and forget that harrowing experience. Riley's psychological state represents the common psychological state of most women who have been raped and violated. The traditional norms in patriarchal societies regard sex as a shameful act, which creates a perception of unclean women and creates a victim-blaming culture. Some may even think that women are raped because they are scantily clad or intentionally engaging in provocative sexual behaviour. As a result, most female victims of sexual assault will become sensitive and often self-deprecating, falling into a state of anxiety and fear. However, with the encouragement and solidarity of her sorority sisters, Riley turned her fear into strength and bravely confronted Brian. Finally, she overpowered Brian, which symbolizes the regaining of her autonomy and identity. In a word, one of the most rewarding

aspects of *Black Christmas* (2019) is that although Riley is initially portrayed as a sensitive victim, the film does not entertain male audiences with scenes of her being sexually assaulted but focuses more on the process of her resistance and empowerment, while criticizing the lasting damage that sexual violence causes for women.

In addition, the film also attempts to emphasize the power of female solidarity from a woman's perspective as a powerful feminist critique of patriarchal social norms. In most male-perspective narratives, women are always arranged in competitive or adversarial relationships. By contrast, *Black Christmas* (2019) is more concerned with the courage of the sorority girls and their sisterhood or mutual support. For example, when they were attacked by the DKO fraternity boys, instead of blaming each other, they banded together to fight them, which reflects their unit and strength. The supportive relationships among sorority girls also stand in stark contrast to the hostile patriarchal social environment. The typical example is that after Riley and Kris escaped from the villa, they could have selfishly gone into hiding, but they didn't do so, especially Riley, she decisively went to the DKO fraternity's base and smashed the bust of the founder, while Kris gathers the surviving girls to fight alongside Riley. Kris's presence brings the film to a climax, and the room turns into a bloody battleground for sororities and fraternities. The fight symbolises women's resistance to extreme patriarchal norms and their quest for autonomy. It also shows that the power of female solidarity is enough to break patriarchal oppression and domination as well as bring empowerment and liberation to oneself. Therefore, the overall portrayal of the sorority girls in the film is very consistent with the principle of the female perspective, aiming to portray women as empowered subjects. At the end of the battle, Professor Gelson shouted that women are inextricably tied to men and would be broken if men were broken. Riley replied triumphantly, "We will never be broken!" Then the victorious sorority girls burned the DKO fraternity's stronghold with a fire, which symbolises that empowered women will eventually escape from the clutches of patriarchal norms. However, the director set up an intriguing scene at the end where a white cat lapped up the black slime left by the DKO fraternity. What she may be trying to convey is that extreme patriarchal norms and toxic masculinity are impossible to eradicate and it may live within individuals like a flu virus.

#### EMPOWERMENT, TRUTH-TELLING AND RACE RELATIONS IN *BLACK CHRISTMAS* (2019)

In *Black Christmas* (2019), Kris is one of the more enlightened members of the group of sorority sisters who are at the centre of the narrative. An African American woman, Kris is an activist for gender and race rights. She is depicted as a force for empowerment and as a truth-teller about the inequities related to race and gender on campus. For example, in the first scenes of the film about Kris, she works to persuade others to sign the petition against Professor Gelson and the ruthless misogyny of higher education. Through her conversations with the MKE sorority girls, it is revealed that the founder of the DKO fraternity, Calvin Hawthorne, was racist and sexist. Hawthorne owned slaves in the north. According to the history of African Americans, in the early 1600s, the European colonizers needed a large labour force to develop plantations and mining on the American continent. This revelation is a reality for many American institutions that have been built on the backs of slaves. Craig Steven Wilder (2013) for instance, has expounded at length about the connection between Ivy League universities and the slave trade – many of those institutions were funded by slavery. Wilder's book follows the report by Brown University in 2006 that unearthed the painful connection between that university and the slave trade. These connections are therefore implied in the narration of Takal's *Black Christmas* in which the founder

of Hawthorne college was a slave owner. These are all truths that are brought up by Kris who mentions Calvin Hawthorne's slaves were in the North, while the North was where the abolitionist movement began, and where slaveholders like founder Calvin Hawthorne would fall. The scene heralds the failure of the DKO fraternity, and the founder's bust will be shattered as a result.

It may be observed from Kris positive actions that she has no tolerance for Hawthorne being the spiritual anchor of a higher-educated organization, much less the offensive words and actions of the group's leader, Professor Gelson. Kris observes that Professor Gelson overreacted in an unhinged and disproportionate manner when all Kris did was ask why his syllabus contained no women, people of colour and people of other marginalized categories. Therefore, Kris defines Professor Gelson as a white supremacist and patriarchal. Gelson's condescending attitude made Kris angry, and the indifference of bystanders to such discriminatory behaviour made her despair. Kris says that if the women let men get away with this sort of behaviour, then they will get away with everything. Kris's pushback against Gelson and the racist legacy of Hawthorne college reflect the real-life pushback against the racist and slavery-connected legacies in both American and British academic institutions. Zacek (2025) notes that there has been institutional pushback against the dark historical connection between American and British academia and the slave trade. This ongoing dialogue in these institutions between the whistle-blowers and those who wish to cover up the past find a mirror in *Black Christmas* (2019). In the film, it may be observed that Kris is the only one who keeps persuading others to sign the petition against Professor Gelson. Kris reacts more violently to sexism and racism than others because her identity is more complex, which mixes both women and people of colour. The dual identity shapes her experiences and actions in the film, which embodies the concept of intersectionality. As a black woman, her intersecting identity makes her activism more challenging, as she deals with the dual oppression and prejudice of race and gender simultaneously in her struggle for justice.

It is inevitable therefore that the spectre of the white supremacist patriarch (Hawthorne) hiding within Gelson manifests in a very dark and supernatural way as he is revealed to be the head of the DKO dark cult. Thus, Kris's truth-telling takes on a surprising, prophetic and supernatural dimension as the abjection of the black fluid becomes an embodiment of the poison inhabiting the campus because of a supremacist patriarchal leadership. In the final confrontation between sororities and fraternities, Kris demonstrates an alternate and exceptional form of leadership. With an ability to delegate, Kris's leadership shows that anyone can be a leader, not just someone who is white and male. Kris's activism demonstrates her resistance to intersecting axes of oppressions and also represents the empowerment that results from advocacy and the struggle for systemic change, which makes her a powerful symbol of a more diverse form of feminism. This is the narrative core of the film which may be connected to the tensions between abjection and empowerment found in the plot.

## CONCLUSION

This article asserts that *Black Christmas* (2019) deploys body horror and abjection through the lens of the female gaze to explore themes related to the subversion of patriarchy, white supremacy and female empowerment. Body horror and abjection both challenge traditional patriarchal norms by breaking down the normalization of the body, losing body autonomy, and self-awareness, and exposing deep-seated gender contradictions. The ways in which feminist body horror is incorporated in films directed by women highlights women's resistance and empowerment under

extreme control of patriarchal norms. In *Black Christmas* (2019), the shifting of perspectives commonly seen in horror cinema through the female gaze, lends a new light to both body horror and abjection. The presentation of the female body and sexual violence implies the objectification and sexualisation of female characters in horror films from a traditional male perspective. Feminist horror films work to change that paradigm, aiming to redefine women's identities and return their autonomy, thereby moving women from passive victimhood to active empowerment. Furthermore, the character of Kris highlights the ways in which race, gender, and class intersect thus revealing the multiple oppression and unfair treatment faced by people with complex marginalisations. *Black Christmas* (2019) combines horror and feminist topics in a way that criticizes and tries to break traditional social norms. The new wave of horror films by younger and more diverse filmmakers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sheds a light on the unequal gender and power dynamics of traditional male-dominated horror films, thus promoting the film production industry towards fairness and equity. This article therefore continues the conversation by interjecting a consolidated approach of abjection, body horror and the female gaze to reiterate that a re-interpretation of the slasher genre can be a vehicle to further explore race, gender and power dynamics as a remedy to the cinematic inequities of the past.

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