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REPRESENTATION OF THE UNSPOKEN: A COMPARATIVE TREATMENT OF INCEST IN
POE'S *THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER* AND ARUNDHATI ROY'S
THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS

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ABSTRACT

The discourse of “incest” is considered almost universally as taboo and so is the study of the phenomena of sexual relations between closely related individuals in its diverse manifestations. Literary texts at length have tried to explore incest as social and psychological deviance but the discussion moves to the margins of the narrative into unspoken or rather “unspeakable” territory. The mainstream discourse prevents the writers from representing and speaking about the theme of incest explicitly. It remains restricted to a marginal space and can be understood only through a deep exploration of the individual characters and the narrative style of the text.

Edgar Allen Poe’s short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*, published in 19th century indirectly represents the incestuous love between Usher and his twin sister Madeline. The plot or the narrative doesn’t speak of the attraction at an external level. A similar relationship exists between Estha and Rahel, the twins in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, published towards the end of the 20th century. The narrative reveals the relation in a subtle manner and never transcends the borders drawn by a repressive social order in representing the taboo. The word “incest” is never spoken as an event but as possibility at the borderlines of what is permissible and what is not within the order.

This paper will compare the two texts and explore strategies used in the narrative to represent incest. I will also explore whether the treatment of the theme of incest has undergone a historical transition in its journey from the 19th century to 20th century.

Keywords: Incest, discourse of incest, representation of unspoken, marginal

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The incest prohibition is at once on the threshold of culture, in culture, and in one sense, as we shall try to show, culture itself” – Claude Levi Strauss: *Elementary Structures of Kinship*

In almost any social order, incest is viewed as a taboo confined to the territory of the “unspeakable”. While from a religious perspective it is viewed through terms such as “sin” which also imply prohibition with serious

consequences attached to the act or the thought, it is viewed as a culmination of psychological deviance in a more modern scenario. Freud in book *Totem and Taboo* examines the regulations placed by the social and religious order in dealing with this taboo. He provides insight into the totems of tribes which prevent sexual relations between close relatives within the group.

Freud mentions in his lectures on psychoanalysis that a boy's first incestuous feelings will be directed towards his mother or sister. In his lectures on 'The Development of Libido' Freud observes:

A human being's first choice of an object is regularly an incestuous one, aimed in the case of the male at his mother and sister, and it calls for the severest prohibitions to deter this persistent infantile tendency from realization. (Freud 335)

As the boy grows up he overcomes this sexual attraction and channelizes it towards those outside the family like finding a mother-figure towards whom he directs his feelings thus finding a substitute for the real mother. But in some cases the attraction felt towards the mother or sister persists either due to the inability to come out of the "psycho- sexual condition that prevailed in the childhood"(17) or the development of such a condition later in life. Freud uses the terms "developmental inhibition" (17) and "regression" (17) for these states of psychological deviance in *Totem and Taboo*.

This psychological deviance is universally recognized as taboo and discussion on it is most of the times pushed into the realm of the "unspeakable". Even among savages the practice of incest among close relatives is taboo and severely punishable under the primitive laws of the group. Their laws against the possibility of incest are much stricter than prohibitions that exist within our society. Freud provides examples of such groups in his *Totem and Taboo*. One of the savage groups that come under discussion is the Australian aborigines, who live on animal flesh and roots. Contrary to our expectations these "naked cannibals" (2) take meticulous care to thwart the practice of incest within the clan.

While pondering over the laws that prevent the practice of this "universal taboo", it is equally important to be aware of certain social situations where incest was in practice and in fact sanctified. According to Freud,

Mythology will teach you that incest, which is supposed to be so much detested by humans, is unhesitatingly allowed to Gods. And you may learn from ancient history that incestuous sister marriage was a sanctified injunction upon the person of the ruler (among Pharaohs and Incas of Peru). (335)

The marital relation between brothers and sisters in Egypt was a conspicuous phenomenon when the practice was prohibited across many cultures. But, according to Levi Strauss:

Ancient Egypt is more disturbing since recent discoveries suggest that consanguineous marriage, particularly between brother and sister, was perhaps a custom which extended to the petty officials and artisans, and was not, as formerly believed, limited to the reigning caste and to the later dynasties (9)

The changes that happened through history or the advent of modernity haven't significantly altered the perception of incest in a social order. It is still considered as morally degrading and now the prevention of incestuous relationship is also backed with arguments based on biological reasoning. The research done by biologists and anthropologists have stated and proved the degradation in physical and mental health among the offspring that happens through inbreeding as sufficient justification of incest prohibition. Though debates on the taboo word are prevalent in social and literary circles, they remain restricted to specific boundaries and are largely dreaded to be talked about or represented in mainstream discourse. Incest remains behind the blinds and members of a social order behave as if such a psychological irregularity doesn't exist for all practical purposes. One of the contemporary novelists Shobha De points out that incest is a terror for many societies and is considered as one of the worst taboos so much so that many cultures pretend as if it doesn't exist. But still we are aware of its existence even if it happens to be at the margins of a social order.

The prohibition of discussion about the tabooed word always existed as a dark inspiration to talk about it. The literary text which in a way is a mirror to the social order never dares discuss the topic overtly. It

is the social order and the moral implications attached to the taboo word that prevents mainstream discourse from dealing with the term explicitly. Pornography of a more salacious kind is the only discourse where the narrative entertains an explicit description of incest, but even here it is always with the pleasure of a taboo that is broken and not as a serious understanding of its social or moral implications. Sociologists and psychologists see incest as a problem and pornographers see it as a solution to sexual repression. Both of them are limited because they don't examine the language of the narrative which involves any discussion on incest. This approach towards the theme of incest exists in a more nuanced manner in literary texts.

Edgar Allen Poe's short story *The Fall of the House of Usher* published in 1839 and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small things*, published in 1997 deal with the theme of twincest or incest between twins. This includes both heterosexual and homosexual relations the most common being the heterosexual.

The Fall of the House of Usher, a 19th century Gothic short story indirectly deals with the theme of incest between the protagonist Roderick Usher and his twin sister Madeline. The author takes the utmost care not to mention the term anywhere in the text but rather conveys it through the description of the extraordinary nature of their family.

I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in their direct line of descent, and had always, very trifling and very temporary variation, so Iain. (129)

This detailed description on the family reveals that the members of the family were engaged in incestuous relations to continue their progeny, "unspoiled" by the interference of another blood. This nature of the Usher family can be related to the inbreeding that was prevalent in Egyptian society, with an aim to maintain the royal bloodline and retain the character and supremacy of their breed across generations. Here the moral implications set by the social order become less significant. But the treatment of the theme by Poe evokes the regulations set by the social order. The incestuous relation between Usher and Madeline culminates in the 'fall of the house of Usher' reminding the readers about the degrading nature of the relation through the narrative.

The twins with "striking similitude" (139) maintained between them "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature" (139). They were capable of telepathic communication which is a major feature of the twins. Such an extraordinary relation can be seen among the twins, Estha and Rahel of *The God of Small Things*. They were "a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities" (2). Like Usher and Madeline they were also capable of telepathic conversations. Their joint identity was so deep that "Rahel has a memory of waking up one night at Estha's funny dream".

Though born as twins Estha was always considered the elder one and had to bear the painful consequences of the mistakes that he did jointly with Rahel. He was the one who was blamed by Margaret Kochamma for Sophie Mol's death and it was he who was sent away to live with his father. It might have been the mounting guilt of being responsible for Sophie Mol's death and the brooding revenge towards Ammu, his mother, for sending him away that made Estha develop an incestuous relation with his sister. According to Freud

A child who has been put into second place the birth of a brother or sister, and who is now for the first time almost isolated from his mother does not easily forgive her this loss of place; feelings which in an adult would be described as greatly embittered arise in him and are often the basis of permanent estrangement. As these brothers and sisters grow up, the boy's attitude to them undergoes very significant transformations. He may take his sister as a love object by way of substitute for his faithless mother. (334)

Thus in Estha we can see the growing isolation which resulted from his estrangement with his mother and twin sister and the guilt, which made him stop talking all of a sudden. He started getting more used to a world that he created for himself. It is the arrival of Rahel, whose sight roused in him memories of his mother. He sees in her the features of their mother, which leads him to develop an incestuous relation with his sister.

Earlier in the text the narrator presents to the readers the attitude of the family, which represents the social order, through the words of Chacko. Chacko said that Estha and Rahel were indecently healthy. And so

was Sophie Mol. He said it was because they didn't suffer from Inbreeding like most Syrian Christians and Parsees. Unlike *The Fall of the House of Usher* in *The God of Small Things*, the approach towards incest is based on moral implications. The narrator has succeeded in presenting the watchful society through the character of "Baby Kochamma".

Baby Kochamma settled back on her pillow and waited to Rahel come out of Estha's room. They had begun to make her uneasy, both of them. A few mornings ago she had opened her window (for Breath of Fresh Air) and caught them red-handed in the act of Returning From Somewhere. Clearly they had spent the whole night out. Together. Where could they have been? What and how much did they remember? When would they leave? What were they doing, sitting together in the dark for so long? (299)

The uneasiness felt by the society on perceiving and thinking of incest is represented through the character of Baby Kochamma. Standing within the boundaries set by the moral principles, Arundhati Roy represents the incestuous attraction between Estha and Rahel. She achieves this with a description of Estha's and Rahel's body as seen through each other's eyes, refraining from triggering any discussion through use of words like "incest" or "sex". A subtlety in the treatment of the theme can be seen here:

Rahel watched his stomach suck inwards and his ribcage rise as his wet T-shirt peeled away from his skin, leaving it wet honey-coloured. His face and neck and a V-shaped triangle at the base of his throat were darker than the rest of him. His arms too were double-coloured. Paler where his shirt sleeves ended. A dark brown man in pale honey clothes. Chocolate with a twist of coffee. His cheekbones and hunted eyes. A fisherman in a white-tiled bathroom, with a sea-secrets in his eyes... Rahel searched her brother's nakedness for signs of herself. In the shape of his knees, the arch of his instep. The slope of his shoulders. The angle at which the rest of the arm met his elbow. The way his toe-nails tipped upwards at the ends. The sculpted hollows of either side of his taut, beautiful buns. Tight plums. Men's bum never grow up. Like school satchels, they evoke in an instant memories of childhood. Two vaccination marks on his arm gleamed like coins. Hers were on her thigh. (91-92)

The narrator attempted a similar description of Rahel's body through the eyes of Estha.

Rahel was lying on Estha's bed. She looked thinner lying down. Younger. Smaller. Her face was turned towards the window beside the bed...Her soft sleeveless T-shirt was a glowing yellow in the dark. The bottom half of her, in blue jeans, melted into darkness...From where he sat, at the end of the bed Estha without turning his head could see her. Faintly outlined. The sharp line of her jaw. Her collarbones like wings that spread from the base of her throat to the ends of her shoulders. A bird held by skin... She was lovely to him. Her hair. Her cheeks. Her small clever-looking hands. (299)

Through these descriptions the author establishes the sensuous feelings Rahel and Estha have for each other. With these observations in place the narrator moves on to describe the intensity of feelings that the twins have for each other.

Their beautiful mother's mouth. Estha, sitting very straight, waiting to be arrested takes his fingers to it. To touch the words it makes. To keep the whisper. His fingers follow the shape of it. The touch of teeth. His hand is held and kissed. Pressed against the coldness of a cheek, wet with shattered rain. Then she sat up and put her arms around him. Drew him down beside her. They lay like that for a long time. Awake in the dark. Quietness and Emptiness...they were strangers who had met in a chance encounter. They had known each other even before Life began. There is very little that one could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi's book) would separate Sex from Love. Or needs from Feelings. (327-328)

The author resists from crossing the boundaries and describing the intensity of feelings. Thus the description is limited to "very little that one could say to clarify what happened next" (328). It implies everything but nothing is being talked about overtly.

When we take a close look at the narrative of *The God of Small Things* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, it becomes clear that the treatment of the tabooed word is set within the boundaries determined by the social order. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* the narrator forms a representative of the society and treats the theme completely adhering to the moral norms. But in *The God of Small Things*, the narrator abstains from

being a part of the society, and represents the response of society through the characters in the novel. Though *The Fall of the House of Usher* represents the moral degeneration achieved through incest, no step towards commenting on the negative aspects of incest is undertaken by the author in Arundhati Roy's novel. But incest is being talked about through careful use of words, trying not to make anything explicit, thus falling in place within the norms set by the social order. Though the author's interest in talking about the prohibited word is revealed, both the texts attempt a careful treatment of the theme thus abiding by the moral principles and values of the order. This itself is evidence that our attitude towards the taboo word continues to remain within the boundaries of the "unspeakable".

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