

THE ULTIMATE UNSPEAKABLE: DISCOURSE ON INCEST NARRATIVES IN INDIAⁱ

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Abstract

Though there is a considerable openness with which issues of gender and sexuality are voiced, discussed and debated today but it is also true that there exists a certain hierarchy in which forms of non-normative sexuality is viewed. Perhaps one of the reasons these hierarchies emerge is because kinship is almost always understood in relation to marriage. The normative sexuality is circumscribed through marriage and as a result bonds outside marriage become foreclosed as illegitimate and illegal. Most of the debates on sexuality are over who or what will be included into the norm. One's body, love, desire and relationships remain unrecognized and unrepresented unless legally incorporated into what forms the norm. Incestuous relationships perhaps lie at the lowest rung of the sexuality as unthinkable, unimaginable and hence unspeakable. Discourse on incest is largely absent in our academia and if at all, it is visible only in its abusive form, that is, as sexual abuse of one form or the other. As Judith Butler argues, "whether the point is to legitimate or delegitimize a non-normative form of sexuality, it seems crucial that we have a theoretical framework that does not foreclose vital descriptions in advance." The present paper will try to understand the reasons for 'horror' that surrounds incest, see if it is possible to imagine the existence of non-abusive forms of incestuous relationships and think of alternate kinship formations.

Keywords: Incest, Kinship, Incest in India, taboo, Anju Mallige, *Desire in the Rocks*, *Thirteen days in September*

This paper essentially is an attempt to rescue the term "incest" from its popular connotations and bring it into the realm of academic discourse. By popular I mean the general understanding of the term that comes through media and related sources. The very term 'incest' invokes a sense of horror in the minds of people. It is almost always immediately understood as a perversity in nature or an abuse of power. This understanding of incest seems to pervade all the debates that surround incest and ignore all other possible meanings. It makes it difficult to talk about it in any other way. The difficulty in any attempt to locate certain parameters that we attach to incest as a discourse lies in the fact that we've already

given it a negative meaning as if there is a latent positive meaning somewhere waiting to be uncovered. The discussion surrounding incest unfortunately falls into the category of binary oppositions where things are either/or. This paper will try to understand the reasons behind the shame, horror and stigma that are attached to incest which make incestuous relationships unmentionable.

In the popular imagination incest is construed to be a sin even when it is not among the immediate blood relatives. A mere google search for 'Incest in India' will lead one to articles which are titled as, for example, "Incest: Haryana's shameful social heritage", "the shocking incident of incest", "Incest India's Hidden Shame", "Incest and the conspiracy of silence" etc. Almost all these articles deal with the abusive aspect of incest where fathers, stepfathers, fathers-in-law, cousins, or brothers molest, coerce into sexual intercourse or rape, daughters, sisters or daughters-in-law. These articles will lead one to believe, quite erroneously, that it is the only way incest exists in the society. The discourse of incest often gets subsumed into the discourse of abuse. The feminist constructions of incest as exploitation of power relations and a betrayal of trust have been powerful enough to penetrate interpretations of incest in popular culture even when adults, not children, are involved and the relationship is of mutual consent, love and care. For instance, in Haryana Babli and Manojⁱⁱ became victims of the khap Panchayat because they married within the same Gothra. According to the Khap marrying within the same Gothra is considered incestuous and thus prohibited. Vikki Bell argues that the notion of incest prohibition is highly problematic as:

Its existence and status are frequently taken for granted and assumed to be a fact of societies. Theories of the origin of the incest prohibition have presupposed that which they are trying to explain, sociological theories of kinship assumes that the incest prohibition exists (and furthermore, that it is efficient) and psychological theories around the perpetrator assume that something called 'the incest prohibition' has been traversed (Bell, 117).

Perhaps the reason behind the existence of incest prohibition is that without the notion of incest there can be no sense of family. The family becomes a recognizable unit owing to the understanding that those are the members with whom one is forbidden to have sexual relationship. The notion of father, mother or sibling becomes clear because of incest prohibition. Thus incest prohibition is related to normative kinship. Though incest is often portrayed as unnatural, it is, according to James B. Twitchell, only *uncultural*ⁱⁱⁱ. Incest is not against the nature but rather against the cultural construct of family.

Much speculation has been made on how incest prohibition must have come into existence. Theorists attempted to explain both the origins and function of incest. According to Edvard Westermarck, people have an innate aversion towards incest and the children raised together never desire each other sexually. According to him this inhibition has later gained societal acceptance and has thus been prohibited (qtd in Shepherd, 45). James Frazer's ironic comment, that if incest avoidance was instinctual why would there be a need to prohibit it, was widely used to discredit Westermarck's theory (Shepherd, 3). Sigmund Freud's theory of Oedipal complex maintained that children had incestuous longings for their opposite-sex parent. Learning to direct these desires towards a love object was supposed to be the key stage in the

child's sexual development. Freudian concept of incest taboo, far from expressing an innate aversion, is an acquired reaction to the innate desire. The taboo is the interiorization of a societal edict. But unlike Freud, taking an entirely different perspective, the socio-biologists claim that incest avoidance is nature's simplest way of enforcing survival of the fittest. Claude Lévi-Strauss bridges this debate between inhibition and prohibition theories. For him the incest prohibition constitutes the transition from nature to culture:

The prohibition of incest is in origin neither purely cultural nor purely natural, nor is it a composite mixture of elements from both nature and culture. It is the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished (Lévi-Strauss, 24).

Lévi-Strauss' theory is based on the idea of exchange and reciprocity. The exchange of gifts was the primary means of forging links between members of the primitive societies, where women were the ultimate gifts to be exchanged between male family members. The formation of rules regarding with whom one could and could not forge sexual relations marked a move away from nature and towards the order of culture. Nevertheless, this explanation is considered inadequate to explain the continuation of incest prohibition in the modern society. According to Harvard Law Review Association:

Anthropological rationale put forward most famously by Claude Lévi-Strauss- that incest prohibitions are a necessary mechanism for building society by forcing people to create alliances outside of narrow family groups- seems entirely inadequate as a reason to prohibit consensual relationships in a modern world whose social integration is not plausibly threatened by the few people who might choose to align themselves with family members (The Harvard Law Review Association, 2466)

Later in society sexuality came to be organised around the family. Legitimate sexual relations were limited to marriage partners and sexual practices were judged according to whether they were proactive and occurred within the confines of the marriage. Incest taboo was the penultimate rule of modern kinship. According to Gayle Rubin:

The incest taboo divides the universe of sexual choice into categories of permitted and prohibited sexual partners. Specifically, by forbidding unions within the groups it enjoins marital exchange between groups. (Rubin, 1997: 36)

In *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* Michel Foucault is of the opinion that by the nineteenth century, the emerging fields of psychiatry and sexology began to categorize sexual practices on a normal or pervasive basis rather than in terms of permissible and forbidden. The significance of blood started to fade, and kinship and sexuality gradually began to separate. Under the deployment of sexuality, sexuality gradually became constructed in terms of pleasure and the quality of erotic experience. Sexual practices, such as incest, came to be judged whether they were pleasurable and healthy or harmful and perverse. And hence incest was and continues to be confined to the category of perversity.

The present analysis will be based on three contemporary plays to show the use of incest motif as cautionary tales against sexual transgression. The social context of the production, circulation and reception of texts will help us understand how the motif of incest is used in literature. The three plays^{iv} taken for the present analysis are Mahesh Dattani's *Thirteen Days*

in *September*^v, Girish Karnad's *Driven Snow*^{vi} and Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Desire in the Rocks*.

Incest is always portrayed as a cautionary tale of the dangers of transgressing sexual boundaries. These plays portray incestuous relationship in ways which often result in reinforcing the taboo. In Dattani's *Thirteen Days in September*, the incestuous relationship is that of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA), in Elkunchwar's *Desire in the Rocks* the shame and stigma attached to the incestuous sibling relationship compels them to commit suicide and in Karnad's *Driven Snow*, the incestuous sibling relationship only brings discomfort and trouble and ultimately leads to death - the ultimate punishment for the transgression. There are certain similarities that emerge in these largely different portrayals of incest on stage.

One aspect that connects the three plays is the incestuous relationship between siblings. Unlike *Thirteen Days in September*, in which the abusive aspect of the relationship is heightened, the relationships may appear to be consensual in *Driven Snow* and *Desire in the Rocks*.

In all three plays one finds disapproval at the thought of incest by at least one of the characters. The dramatists themselves seem eager to refrain from commenting on the element of incestuous desire depicted in their plays. In the conversation between Girish Karnad and Tutun Mukherji, she observes that he still seems to have reservations about the play [*Driven Snow*] Anju Mallige (Mukherji, Girish 51). In most of his conversations on *Thirty Days in September*, Mahesh Dattani talks of incestuous abuse only as child sex abuse without referring to the incestuous nature of the abuse (Mukherji, *The Plays* 29). Rather than explaining how incest is used as a motif, my analysis will focus on the writing and the reception of these texts.

Of the three texts that are mentioned only *Thirty Days in September* did not suffer because of its subject. The play was commissioned by RAHI (Recovering and Healing from Incest), a Delhi based organization, working with the survivors of incest. The play effectively brings out the incestuous abuse, the resultant trauma and the ultimate healing of the incest survivor. I will venture that *Thirty Days in September* was well received since it was only an articulation of an already existing narrative and does not question the prohibition. It is understandable that only abusive aspect of incest is brought out since it is a play commissioned by RAHI and is based on the accounts of survivors who have found incest abusive and traumatic. Dattani says that the play was based on the accounts of seven or eight incest survivors (Subramanyam, 133).

On the other hand Girish Karnad's *Driven Snow* was not staged for seventeen long years after its initial production^{vii} in 1978. Perhaps one of the reasons could be that it dealt with consensual incest between siblings. This is Karnad's only play which has a foreign setting and ironically also the one which is not published in English, though the playwright has already translated it to English in 2001. Although the play is not a departure from the existing narratives as it results only in reconfirming prohibition yet the play was considered to be transgressive in nature. Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Vasanakand*^{viii} was denied permission for performance by the State Performance Security Board, Government of Maharashtra. The note on Stage History and Censorship on *Vasanakand* reads:

The Board came down heavily on the play which deals with the incestuous relationship between a brother and sister, finding it ‘grossly immoral’, ‘obscene’, ‘without any indication of remorse on the part of two’, and with ‘no predominant artistic and social purpose’. A letter banning the play was sent to Aniket on 18th June 1974 (Elkunchwar, 312).

The judgement makes one believe that if ‘remorse’ was shown in the play it could have cleared the certification. It also suggests that the play was not banned because of the depiction of incestuous relationship but rather because of the depiction of it remorselessly. The banning of the play is also a way of silencing the possibility of alternative discourse when it depicts apparently consensual incestuous relationships. The only way incest is allowed to be visible and heard is when it is abusive and does not question the existing prohibition. The silence that surrounds instances of incest results in its being treated as an exception or perversity.

RAHI, claims that one of their main efforts is to “break the silence that exists around incest and talk about the way it happens in our society” (Ailawadi, viii). RAHI’s work is commendable as one of their focus is to sensitize about the prevalence of incest in the society. Some of their initiatives like workshops on Incest and Child Sexual Abuse in schools and colleges give students platforms to articulate about the abuse. It initiates discussions on incest by screening movies related to incestuous abuse and conducting talks. Nevertheless, RAHI works with the assumption that incest is always traumatic and abusive in nature:

Incest usually refers to the *sexual abuse* [emphasis mine] of a child or adolescent within a family by a parent, authority figure or by a more powerful sibling or other relative. It also encompasses those who are close enough to be ‘as if’ family or are invested in the child in a functional role involving trust (Ailawadi, 106)

However, this understanding of incest reduces the possibilities of alternative ways in which incest could be understood. This understanding forecloses the existence of consensual incestuous relationships and undermines the value of consent. In the plays discussed above the notions of shame, stigma and morality is invoked but the question of legality or consent does not surface within the plays. Perhaps this is because there is no legislation on incest in India and it is subsumed in the category of sexual abuse and rape in Indian Penal Code^{ix}. Incest can denote two different forms of behaviour- consensual or non-consensual. Often incest is associated with non-consensual forms such as rape and child sex abuse.

The understanding of adult incestuous relationships ought to rest on whether it is consensual or not. According to the Harvard Law Review Association:

Organizing the incest laws on the basis of nonconsent would thus maximize the freedom of intimacy for nondependent family members and maximize the protection of dependent family members in a way consistent with other areas of law (2468).

The existing narratives on incest in India focus only on the abusive nature of it and thus foreclose the possibilities of other ways of reading and understanding it. Butler argues:

...I do think that there are probably forms of incest that are not necessarily traumatic or which gain their traumatic character by virtue of the consciousness of social shame that they produce. (Butler, 157)

The assumption that all incestuous relationships are traumatic limits the discourse on incest. It results in derealization of relationships outside the normative kinship. Butler sees both homosexuality and incest as forms of love that are derealized or prohibited by the norms established by incest taboo. Whether we legitimize or delegitimize it is important that, “we have a theoretical framework that does not foreclose vital descriptions in advance” (Butler, 159). As Butler suggests there is a need to widen our theoretical framework to include other possible ways of reading and understanding incest.

Notes:

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ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manoj-Babli_honour_killing_case. accessed on October 10, 2014

ⁱⁱⁱ For more discussion see, James B. Twitchell, *Forbidden Partners: The Incest Taboo in Modern Culture*, p. XI

^{iv} *Thirteen Days in September* is written in English where as Girish Karnad’s *Driven Snow*(2001) was originally written in Kannada titled *Anju Mallige* and later translated to English by the playwright himself but is not published yet. Elkunchwar’s play is a translation of his Marathi play *Vasanakand*. This paper will use the titles *Driven Snow* and *Desire in the Rocks* interchangeably with their original titles *Anju Mallige* and *Vasanakand* respectively.

^v First performed at Prithvi Theatre, Mumbai, on 31 May 2001.

^{vi} The analysis is based on the copy of the unpublished manuscript translated by the author himself. *Anju Mallige* remains his only play which is not published in English. One wonders if it has something to do with the subject.

^{vii} See, ‘Looking Incest in the Eye: Girish karnad’s controversial play Anju Mallige’, *The Times of India*, November 20, 1994 ; ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

^{viii} First original Marathi production of the play was opened as a private performance by Aniket in Mumbai on 17th August 1974.

^{ix} See IPC Article 376(f) “being a relative, guardian or teacher of, or a person in a position of trust or authority towards a woman, commits rape on such a woman” www.indiacod.nic.in/acts-in-pdf-132013.pdf accessed on 12 October 2014.

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