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Incest in *The Bluest Eye*: A case study

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Abstract

Tony Morrison is a celebrated Afro-American novelist, who foregrounds in her imagined narratives the post-slavery discourse. Her deep interest in African American culture is manifest in her selection of the storylines of culturally and historically determined families. She has given a sensational representation of father-daughter incestuous relationship in *The Bluest Eye*. In institutionalized slavery black women were reduced to the level of animals for sex by white men, which was a traumatic experience for them. Simultaneously, these women were exploited by black men. Their existence was in double jeopardy. The objectification of female body has been one of the central issues in her fiction. Black women have been subject to sexual exploitation, oppression, suppression and repression, so much so that they suffered sexual dysfunctions, neurotic anxiety, hallucinations and insanity. Pecola, the young defenseless daughter in the fictional world of the novel is abused as a sex object by none other than her own father. She grows up into a woman with very low self-esteem, low self-worth; and she occasionally hallucinates. The present paper undertakes to explore the incest with its causes and aftereffects via the textual evidence.

Keywords: Incest, rape, repression, hallucination, insanity, psychology

Introduction

Incest is not only a confusing category but also psychologically disturbing. But the more important issue is its socially disruptive consequences because it mixes up kinship relations; it destabilizes social structures; and it does not serve the interests of patriarchy. Social identity roles also get confused due to incestuous unions and multiplying relationships thereby, as is evident in Lot's example in the Bible. Father-daughter incest is a deviant behaviour from asexual norm to sexual transgression; hence it causes psychologically and socially serious damages to all the members of the family. The ill effects of the incest get reflected in their behaviour as has been informed in psychopathological cases that, on disclosure of the incest, father, at first, resorts to firm denial of the deed but later fixes daughter's responsibility as a temptress and seductive, while daughter in her confession expresses feelings of great annoyance and bitterness against the father. The whole family generally coalesces to keep the secret and present an image of a scrupulously perfect family. Father-perpetrator negates daughter-victim's human identity. He turns out to be a narcissistic, authoritarian and powerful abuser of the marginalized and dependent daughter. As Juan Eduardo Tesone holds that female self is repressed "when an incestuous father uses his daughter's body to obtain a certain type of sexual pleasure, he negates her as a person, as a self distinct from him" (Mann, 14).

Father-daughter incest is explicit in sexual transgression; nevertheless it is implicit in unconsummated but unethical interest in and immoral infatuation with daughter. In other words the 'overt' form of incest is obvious, while the 'covert' form of incest does not get recognized categorically because the daughter (victim) does not get abused, rather she feels idealized and privileged. However, it is equally suffocating and damaging to the psychic well-being of the daughter; though it can be discerned through perusal of interfamilial relationships. Kenneth M. Adams has rightly pointed out that in covert father-daughter incest father puts his emotional needs at priority at the cost of daughter's by ruling out the emotional space for her to the extent that she happens to assume the role of a 'surrogate spouse' to him. When the daughter realizes that her father's love and caring is "more confining than freeing, more demanding than giving, more intrusive than nurturing"; she feels that she is entangled in a psychological marriage with her father (Adams, 16).

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The victimized daughter consequent upon incest has a low self-esteem, and she runs through unworkable relationships, emotional suffocation, sexual dysfunctions, eating disorders, and more. But in severe cases, the daughter has been found suffering from depression, anxiety, and multiple psychic disorders. Incest is psychologically harmful and daughter's behaviour shows certain traits, such as, the first incest encounter with father makes her feel guilt and shame. She remains silent because of family members', especially mother's possible disapproval and punitive measures. She may also fear her father's strong denial and retaliation and thereby losing security and acceptance in home space. However, repeated sexual relations may make her draw power, freedom, and money in the form of bribes. She may also nurture a misplaced sense of responsibilities in serving father's needs, in keeping family intact, in protecting younger ones. Most often, she remains inarticulate and continues with incest, but the eventual disclosure of the continuing incest happens when she is in her late adolescence partly because old father is no match for young friends. Consequently, she rebels, disobeys parents and very often runs away from home and indulges in drug abuse and alcoholism and promiscuity. Whereas the incestuous father on disclosure, primarily strongly denies as though lost in total amnesia but he may also claim it his "right to initiate his daughter into sex" and by doing so he is only "protecting her from outsiders" (Rea, 98, 99). He is distant, aloof, uninvolved and unloving, but demanding. He can play a role but not build trustworthy communicating relationships. Such an incestuous family, as is unanimously agreed by sociologists, is relatively alienated from the community for it being a dysfunctional unit, which implies that "emotional, psychological and social communication between family members is severely impaired" (Rea, 71). Thus, father daughter incestuous relationship causes several distress and damage to all concerned.

Jung opines that libido is psychic life force which in an adult manifests in sexuality and it is incompatible for an adult to retrieve the same infantile relationship with parent opposite in sex because its sexual instincts give rise to incestuous longing. According to Jung, "Since incest must be avoided at all costs, the result is either the death of the son-lover or his self castration as punishment for the incest he has committed, or else the sacrifice of instinctuality, and especially of sexuality as a means of preventing or expiating the incestuous longing." (Jung, *Aspects of the Masculinity*, p., 5). Father is symbolic representation of heavenly father; likewise he, towards his daughter is supposed to express asexual sublimated love and protect her in the image of God. But, as per natural law, the opposites or antithesis are bound to be there, hence father's potentialities may appear in binary opposites such as god/ Satan (religiosity), sublimated affection/low sexuality (ethical), repressed sexuality/sexual lust (neurosis), good/evil (spirituality). So father's personality has positive and negative components, and virtue and faults may appear in his behaviour so much that he needs to consciously invoke the sense of moral responsibility so as to make the right choice. In case of father daughter incest, the negative potential of father archetype surfaces where he, "by identifying with the daemon, by letting himself be possessed by it, thus (forfeits) his own humanity." (Jung, *Aspects of Masculinity*, 77). It develops in daughter a serious neurosis as "the father daemon has laid his hand upon his daughter, so that her

whole life long, even when she does marry there is never a true inward union, because her husband's image never succeeds in obliterating the unconscious and continually operative infantile father ideal" (77).

The Bluest Eye (1969) is the first novel of Toni Morrison, who has hyphenated identity of African-American writer. The post-slavery narrative is set in 1939 with some forward and backward movement in time. The structure of novel contains four divisions entitled as 'Autumn', 'Winter', 'Spring' and 'Summer'. There is a nuclear black family at the center of events that consists of four members, Cholly, Pauline, Sammy, and Pecola. Cholly and Pauline are caught in an injured marriage because quarrels and fighting are their regular routine which makes their family life horrible. The willingness of the couple to indulge in feuds is mentioned by the writer as follows:

But the unquarrelled evening hung like a first not of a dirge in sullenly expectant air. An escapade of drunkenness, no matter how routine, had its ceremonial close. The tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified... by these quarrels... they relieved the tiresomeness of poverty. To deprive her of these fights was to deprive her of all the zest and reasonableness of life... And once when a drunken gesture catapulted Cholly into the red-hot stove, she screamed, 'Get him, Jesus! Get him!' If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became (*BE*, 31)

The kind of life the Breedloves are living is caused by their personal faulty socialization or lack of proper education. Cholly is abandoned by his mother, Melba, when he was just four days old, on a junk-heap. Melba is one of those unfortunate black girls who become mothers without marriage and are destined to live scandalous life. Aunt Jimmy saves the child. Cholly was fourteen when he was caught by two white men (hunters) in the act of making love to Darlene; they forced the black couple at gunpoint to perform again for their enjoyment, but he turns out an impotent. He was too anxious to be around Darlene fearing that she may become pregnant. He leaves her in search of his biological father, Samson Fuller, and when he meets him in Macon, the latter angrily rejects him. Cholly is shocked and got smeared with his own uncontrollable shit. He rushes to a river to clean himself, therefrom he was led by three whores to their place and he gets back his masculinity. Thus Cholly comes of age without proper socialization, education, love, and accountability. Morrison writes, Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt -- fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity... killed three white men... Abandoned in a junk-heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him (*BE*, 125,126).

Morrison presents a realistic picture of unhealthy and rather horrible relationship between father and daughter in *The Bluest Eye*. The abnormal relationship between Cholly and Pecola is not only a cause of concern for social fathers for its being against socially acceptable norms and values but also a serious threat to psychological well-being of the daughter. Cholly rapes Pecola under the influence of alcohol twice; first, Pecola is so horrified and mentally pressurized that she goes unconscious. Home turns out an unsafe and insecure place for a young girl of eleven years, who is dependent on and defenseless against the powerful father.

She is left with no other choice than complaining about the misdemeanor to her mother, who does not believe in her allegation. She is thoroughly devastated and depressed, so much so that when her father attempts second time rape on her she neither resists nor complains. Both Cholly and Pecola indulge in sexual activity as animals do. They are reduced to the level of animals, who have no honour to save, no social norms, values and codes of behavioural propriety to follow. Herein the purest bond of father-daughter has been violated, because Cholly is unable to comprehend the sanctity and sublimated affection in this relationship. He was never socialized in a family way, as he was rejected by both mother and father. Morrison writes clearly,

Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be (BE, 126).

However, the heinous crime he committed against innocent Pecola cannot be taken with leniency owing to his circumstantial negative brought up. He is not an animal in the first place, secondly, he knows social constraints on sexuality, especially incest prohibition in close relations, as he gets married to Pauline and settles in the institution of family. There is no denying the fact that his incest is caused by alcoholism, poverty and a quarreling unsympathetic wife. Pecola is minor and helpless and cannot overthrow her rapist father, a six feet tall drunken lout. She has been stupid, and to make the situation worse her psychological health deteriorates into depression and hallucination. Pecola having given birth to premature baby who dies instantly, heads towards insanity. Morrison strongly condemns Cholly's love for Pecola as unhealthy, unsafe, dangerous, wicked, violent and immoral.

Pecola loses her mental poise and has very low self-esteem and self-worth. She is not even properly attended by her mother, Pauline. On the contrary, the latter socializes her negatively by instilling in her "a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (BE, 100). The failure of mother's role is evident in the following conversation, wherein Pecola talks to an imaginary friend named Jane in a hallucinatory confession:

Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?

I did tell her.

I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch.

I wasn't sleeping! I was reading!

You don't have to shout.

You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her.

So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?

She wouldn't have believed me then either (BE, 158).

Pauline miserably fails Pecola, as she falls behind in her maternal concerns and duties. She is the next immediate prop to rely upon if Pecola is to be resurrected from her lost humanity. Even society doesn't come forward to support her. She is hated for what has happened to her. People used her waking dreams to silence their own nightmares.

As the family is poverty-stricken, Mrs. Breedlove gets a job, but her employer, a white lady forces her to leave Cholly. So she becomes an 'ideal servant' like her mother and ignores her household, her children, and her husband and devoted herself to the white family like a faithful servant. Morrison reports,

More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man -- they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep... here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise... (BE, 99).

The first incest encounter between father and daughter occurs when mother is away from home working for white lady, and Cholly comes home dead drunk. Herein poverty, alcoholism, incorrect socialization and dysfunctional family are certain factors leading to incest. Apart from disbelieving her, mother doesn't guide her in matters of menstruation and pregnancy. After the premature delivery and death of infant, she loses control over her thoughts; and she acutely becomes conscious of her ugliness and prays to have blue eyes so that she may become pretty and attract loving care and attention of everyone around.

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