



## Beyond Being Instinctive: An Inquiry into Incest through Media

Tripathi S and Kaur SP\*

School of Languages and Literature, SMVD University, Katra, Jammu and Kashmir, India

\*Corresponding author: Kaur SP, Assistant Professor, School of Languages and Literature, SMVD University, Katra, Jammu and Kashmir, India, Tel: 9796298296; E-mail: simranpreetsmvdu@gmail.com

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### Abstract

Incest prohibition is contradictory in itself; despite being considered instinctive in nature, there still exists a wide circulation of societal and political laws against incest. These regulations are perpetuated through the medium of mass communication which assist in reinforcing the values and seemingly creating law and order. The suppressed desires find a vent out through Media as it triggers as well as promulgates incest, putting forth valid reasons to justify actions. The objective of this research is to explore the portrayal of incestuous relationships in Media and the reasons that assist in its propagation. The study claims that sex and/or incest should not be considered as a taboo as it is inherent part of human evolution and that removal of control over libido can lead to an advancement and progression of society.

**Keywords:** Prohibition; Laws; Media; Trigger; Evolution; Libido

### Introduction

#### Incest as a taboo

Society is an emblem of human characteristics and behaviour that are not genetically inherent. These set of traits; being acceptable as well as taboos, are social constructs that are imposed on human beings. Being cultural containers of these beliefs, humans transmit these sociological conditions from one generation to another. The transference of constructed set of traits, which at times are said to be taboos are time and again taught despite their instinctive nature. Incest, being considered as a taboo universally, is said to be instinctive [1] and its avoidance works as a mechanism to drive the individual into societal relationships. By calling incest as “instinctive” and forming rules against it is in itself contradictory. In cue with this, White in *The Definition and Prohibition of Incest* has claimed that “To say that prohibitions against incest are “instinctive” is of course to declare that

there is a natural, inborn and innate feeling of revulsion towards union with close relatives” [2].

“Societies have generally condemned sexual relations between blood relatives as a sort of perversion” (*Code of Canon Law*, 1091). The feeling of union is prohibited through wide circulation of strict laws against it. As a matter of fact, the strict widespread rules and regulations against incest show that humans have universal and powerful sexual attraction towards one’s relatives [3]. Conversely, some societies treat marriage with first cousin not as an incestuous activity. Anthropologists have demonstrated the kinship structures or socially constructed rules of endogamy and exogamy, the prohibitions on sexual intercourse or marriage between certain members of a family varies from culture to culture and from century to century [4]. Should one assume that instinct varies from community to community? It appears that explanations like these merely hide our ignorance behind the cover of our pseudo-knowledge. Further, most of the communities prohibit marriages within a family. But on the other hand, sibling marriage had been allowed in “the royal family (in ancient Egypt, Peru, and Hawaii); in Egypt in the Graeco-Roman period (300 BC to AD 300) brother–sister marriages among non-royal citizens were recorded quite frequently in the census records” [5].

Further, in the contemporary decade, countries like Japan abolished incest law in 1881 [6]. Being a reflection of cultural inheritance, the tradition of incest in Japan holds its prominence due to the myth of Izanagi and Izanami where in brother and sister married each other and created the country of Japan [7]. This myth formulated the basis for acceptance of widely rejected notion of incest. Moreover, who believed that lovers from the past life got reincarnated as siblings, elucidating more reason to believe that there is nothing wrong in sibling incest.

Society sets certain reasons for the prohibition of incest. Social theorist such as Lewis H. Morgan has highlighted incestuous relations lead to “biological degeneration” [8] and that the theory is believable and self-explanatory and always goes without a doubt. Conversely, research reflects that the “inbreeding as such does not cause degeneration; the testimony of biologists is conclusive on this point” [2]. Rather inbreeding only intensifies the traits either good or bad. If the

child with the union of sister and brother is inferior it is not because he is born by the union of brother and sister rather because the parents were of inferior stock [2]. Superior traits or inferior traits both get intensified by inbreeding. If the offspring of brother-sister or father-daughter unions in our own society are often weak-minded or inferior it is because these individuals are more likely to break the incest taboo than normal men and women never thought of and hence are more likely to cause degeneration [2]. Conversely, there exists reflection of no prohibition regarding brother-sister marriages in some societies like the ancient ruling families of Egypt, where in one can trace an insight of incest in case of Cleopatra, child born out of brother-sister marriages that continued for several generations within the ruling family and she was “not only handsome, vigorous, intellectual, but also prolific... as perfect a specimen of the human race as could be found in any age or class of society” [9].

Likewise, another prominent reason for incest avoidance can be traced in Leslie’s “The Definition and Prohibition of Incest” where in the researcher quotes Freud’s hypothesis as to how human society evolved through incestuous relationship between father and daughter which soon diminished after the death of the father [2]. Later on, this pledge was passed on from generation to generation and through this process the institution of marriage outside the family as well as incest being a taboo, both were established. It can also be suggested that man-made culture and the traditional societal set-up are the reasons for the prohibition of incest. These cultures act as a rule book for people to show them the ways that are acceptable in society and any disobedience towards these rules is considered as crime [10].

Digressing from such futile claims, the research proposes that incest has never been relegated as a taboo rather it is claimed that it led to the creation of the world. Hindu, Biblical or Greek mythologies impinge upon the necessity of incest in the formation of the world. In Hindu mythology, incest holds a paramount reflection and is considered to be the reason for the formation of the universe [11]. In accordance with the myths in *Matsya Purana*, one of the eighteen major *Mahapurana* and among the oldest preserved in the Puranic genre of Sanskrit literature in Hinduism [12], Lord Brahma existed alone in the world and decided to split himself in two parts, creating a feminine counterpart Saraswati, considered to be Brahma’s daughter. The result of this incestuous relationship of daughter and father is their creation, Manu, the demigod [13]. This mythological reference attests to the fact the universe was formed as a result of incest, claiming that it was done for a good cause.

Moreover, in Bible, Abraham, who is a common patriarch of the three religions; Christianity, Islamic and Judaism, is also known as the symbol of the covenant. God promises Abraham a child with his own sister Sarai and God fulfils his promise by giving them a son Isaac who was born when Sarai was ninety years old (Genesis 20:12, Genesis 17:17). The biblical reference clearly is an evidence of how God himself supported incest, he promised to give them a child and it didn’t matter whether it was through incest. Moreover, if one looks at Adam and Eve,

both of them were the only human beings on the earth so their children had no other choice but to marry and reproduce within their family (Genesis 4).

Further, the Greek Mythology is a vast corpus of incest between Gods; Zeus and Hera were both brother-sister and a husband-wife, their parents Cronus and Rhea were also siblings. Moreover, Cronus and Rhea were again the children of Uranus and Gaia who were involved in mother-son incestuous relationship [14]. Moreover, according to Greek mythology, Gaia, the goddess of earth also known as mother earth created the universe by giving birth to both gods and humans.

Delving into literary narratives, which in itself are reflections of society, incest has been one of the popular themes. Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, one of the Greek classic, talks about the mother-son incest and how one cannot ever escape the fate [15]. Oedipus was fated to kill his own father and marry his own mother. So it doesn’t matter how much he tried to avoid, he eventually ended up doing it. Moreover, peeping into the inception of English literature, Chaucer, the Father of English Poetry, is amongst the first to write about the incest in *The Canterbury Tales*. He talks about the incest through The Squire’s Tale in which Canace and her brothers have committed incest [16]. Chaucer’s contemporary, John Gower in *Confessio Amantis* Book VIII emphasizes upon the theme of incest in the story of “*Apollonius of Tyre*”. Further, history of English literature is also testimony to the first play on incest, *Tis Pity She’s a Whore*, where in there exists incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister. Authors of such texts, “consciously or unconsciously replicates the dominant ideology in his/her work and thus “spreads” it among the readers” [17], thereby, suggesting that those who commit such heinous crime meet a devastating end. In a way, incest being a socially constructed ‘taboo’ is taught to us rather than being an inbuilt trait or maybe it is merely a circulation of ideology of the dominant class. Keeping in cue with the aforesaid, the study traces this shift in perspective regarding incest prohibition where at one end it is relegated as taboo and conversely, is a widely accepted notion as well; where one art form perpetuates the ideology of the dominant class whereas the other art form triggers suppressed human desires.

### Incest and media: A reflection of the cultural revolution

Media is a very important part of human culture [18] and members of every age group are attached to it and get influenced by it. The media is generally treated as the reflection of the society; it displays things which are happening in the society. Likewise, society also gets affected by the things that are displayed in the television. In other words, one can say that media is altering or modifying the definitions associated with the word taboo by displaying it from different perspectives. Media plays a vital role in removing the word ‘taboo’ from incest. Winnail, said, “Television, movies and the Internet are having an effect on mankind that would have been unimaginable even a century ago. The media—print and electronic—shape our lives and our minds in ways that most fail to realize, and with sobering effects!” [19]. “Incest is

supposed to be awful" [20] but the ways in which media represents it, gives entirely a new direction to the incestuous studies.

Incest is the inherent part of the human evolution and its reflection in present day media is actually triggering the suppressed human desires. The projection of such censored activity is accompanied by some valid reasons; such as will to power, insecurity in the social realm, lack of trust, unhappy marriage, so that it becomes an acceptable notion when portrayed in media. Film makers try to blend it in the storyline and provide some solid reasons for displaying it so that the audience can understand the character and can also understand his or her reasons for doing so. But such representations can change society's rules and regulations and affect their ways of thinking. Media being the topmost mass of communication plays a vital role in propagating taboos and even fostering it at the same time. Displaying all kinds of incest, media, specifically in the recent decades, has projected it in a positive light reflecting that incest happens due to the sense of trust and safety that opposite sex feels within the family. In the light of this argument, the paper purports to explore the theme of incest in the most widespread television series, *Game of Thrones*.

### Reasons for disappearance of taboo: A critical insight into game of thrones

**Cersei-Jamie: An emblem of incest:** Incest, being very common in *Game of Thrones*, be it at House Lannister or at House Targaryen, is justified by giving the name of love amongst brother-sister who claim that "we shared a womb, came into this world together, we belong together" [21] or for the sake of keeping the bloodline pure in order to control the dragons and maintaining Valyrian legacy "The Targaryens wed brothers and sisters for three hundred years to keep bloodlines pure" [21]. Cersei and her twin brother Jamie are involved in an illicit romance since childhood. Amid the conflicting ambiance, the incestuous relationship between siblings is justified through the sense of trust and reliability that family members have for each other.

When all the elders in the family are involved in the political activities, these twins and the only one for each other, start developing a stronger association which later turns in form of love and leads to incest. The reason for incest in their case is the trust they have for each other and for them, people outside their family are dangerous. They cannot trust any other because they live amidst their enemies so the only place where they can show trust is for each other. Even when Cersei becomes the queen of Seven Kingdoms, Jamie is always besides her. The trust that she shows for her brother, is never the same for her husband. The bond that she forms after marriage with her husband Robert Barithan can never replace her childhood bond. Moreover, their marriage has a political agendas rather than being a product of love.

Likewise, focussing upon the character of Robert Barithan, he never stands on what can be called a 'good husband', who shares a bonding and a level of understanding with his wife

and also has leaves his past relationship. Robert, even after his marriage, laments his past relationship with Lyaana Stark and never shares the same feeling with his own wife Cersei. Further, he never projects any interest in his kingdom or his family. Being a worthless king and an emotionless husband, he enjoys his personal life without doing anything productive to support the common people of his kingdom. On the other hand Cersei is always shown as a very strong character; she can never let such man to be the father of her children. So, the distorted relationship which she has with her husband and the emotional attachment that she has for her brother can be considered to be the two prominent reasons why Cersei prefers him over her husband.

In a sexual intercourse, partners are chosen on the basis of trust, love and admiration [22] and all these qualities are generally seen strongly within family members rather than outsiders. If we look things from Cersei's perspective her love for her brother is true and pure, their bond is stronger than any other bond and choosing him as a father for her child is a very ideal situation. Living in the castle full of enemies in which she can't trust anyone and having a husband who is madly in love with someone else; who else she can trust in these kinds of situations. Jamie, her brother in that kind of situation aptly fits in the roles of a husband, a brother, a lover and a friend for her sister. Living in the world full of enemies supporting each other is the only way through which they have survived this far. Cersei's love for Jamie is so strong that she never hides it, while living in a conservative society. She even faces a walk of atonement which was a public ritual of punishment and penance in the Faith of the Seven (a kind of church). It forces a confessed sinner to walk some distance stripped of all clothing, exposed to the eyes and jeers of the population. She suffers this insane punishment because she confesses that she is involved in adulterous relationship with her twin brother Ser Jamie Lannister. She suffers such a serious punishment not because of incest rather because of the society in which she lives. For them the only word synonymous to incest is taboo, they never try to find the reasons why she involves in such activities. The following conversation between Jaime and Cersei reflect their helplessness for not calling their children their own [23]:

Cersei Lannister: "Our daughter's in danger and you're worried I'm speaking too loudly."

Jaime Lannister: "The world can't know she's our daughter."

Cersei Lannister: "Then don't call her your daughter! You've never been a father to her."

Jaime Lannister: "If I was a father to any of my children, they'd be stoned in the streets."

Incest has never been approved and it does not matter in which century we are living in. Society raises voice against it. If in their opinion incest is a taboo then there is nothing in the world that can change their ideas, in the following conversation from *Game of Thrones* one can see people's way of thinking which is a product of their society and is also formed under its influence.

"True, we don't tie ourselves in knots over a discreet bit of buggery, but... brothers and sisters? Where I come from, that stain would be very difficult to wash out."

—Olenna Tyrell to Tywin Lannister [24].

It can be highlighted that incest in Game of Thrones is not a result of random choice rather a result of trust and emotional security that a sister feels for her brother and also the lack of understanding between husband and wife. Further, relationships are usually based on trust and love and in Cersei's case she finds all these kinds of bonds with her brother.

**Individuality and self-surveillance in Cersei:** Ulrich Beck, in "Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences" defines individualization as, "individuals are compelled now to make agonistic choices throughout their life-course... they are required to take sole responsibility for the consequences of choices made or, indeed, not made" [25]. Women in the past, according to him, lived their life for others; they had to face the social inequality, had no individuality and had to live in the shadows of others. But with the passage of time, the identity of women has transitioned from being a passive or submissive agent towards active agents who are self-surveillant. They live their lives for themselves and not for others [25]. In the similar vein, Game of Thrones being a fictional story has some associations with the trends or traits of medieval era. Cersei Lannister as one of the main characters of the series is displayed as the woman of the middle age but her characteristics are totally different. She is a queen totally different from the queens of the medieval era, portrayed as a very strong woman who doesn't follow others blindly rather forces others to follow her.

"A queen ought to be chaste, wise of honest people, well mannered, and not curious" [26]. They were supposed to follow their husband in every possible way. They should never defy their husband and always live in the back and never comes forefront. Tracing the qualities of a good queen from the mirror of medieval era, the basic function of a good queen is to provide a male heir for the kingdom. Queens from the middle ages were forced to give birth to male child despite the fact that shaping the gender of the child is out of their control. If they were unable to give birth to a male heir then that reason could be enough for dissolving their marriage. If one looks at the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Louis VII of France, their marriage was dissolved as Eleanor was unable to give son to Louis even after fifteen years of their marriage [27]. In Game of Thrones, queens are also expected to give birth to a male heir but queens in this series are not shown weak to follow the rules blindly. Queen Cersei Lannister too has to give an heir, but she doesn't want her children to be like her husband moreover her love for her brother is stronger than her duty towards her husband so she conceives through her brother Jamie but projects that they belonged to her husband, Robert Barithan due to social obligations.

In the medieval era, queens were supposed to be faithful towards their husband. It was obvious that kings were committing adultery but a queen can never involve herself in

such activities, if any queen ever found guilty for committing adultery then she suffered severe punishment, mostly they were beheaded. But in Game of Thrones Cersei finds her happiness with her brother so rather than going for husband she chooses her brother and stays with him, she even confesses her disloyalty in her marriage to her father. She doesn't care what others think about her rather prefers to be true to herself.

Medieval queens were never considered rational because of their 'feminine' qualities and because of the claim that they are emotional beings. Masculine appearance and attributes, on the contrary, provided a platform to women like Empress Matilda who ruled for short duration as her cousin Stephen was captured during the Anarchy. During her short reign, she attempted to copy her father King Henry I's [28]. In other words, she, following her father's footsteps, displayed her capabilities as a good queen. In Game of Thrones "queens often struggle to maintain their power despite their royal role given to their sex" [29]. Characters like Cersei and Daenerys are the best examples for maintaining both of their feminine and masculine qualities. They maintain their feminine qualities through their beautiful appearance and soft voices but they are also able to display their 'masculine' side by controlling the whole army and dragons.

Germaine Greer, in her thesis "The Female Eunuch" talks about the libido and says that the societal set up and their culture are the reasons for women's separation from their libido. So, women have to liberate themselves from all these set ups so that they can act freely and for doing that they need to give up chastity and marriage. In other words, she is trying to say that the sex with someone other than husband is not a taboo anymore. Likewise, a parallel can be drawn between Greer's notion and the depiction of Cersei in Game of Thrones. She lives her life the way she wants, without following any restriction imposed by the society. She gives up her marriage, her chastity and only focuses upon her happiness. For her what matters the most is her own happiness and society comes at secondary level.

**Unhappy marriage: Subverting social order in game of thrones:** Another prominent reason which leads to incest in Game of Thrones can be unhappy marriage. Cersei never gets love from Robert, the love that a woman expects from her husband in a marital relationship. Further, Robert Barithan can never be considered as the ideal husband; he loves Lyaana Stark and never cares about his kingdom or his wife. Moreover, the reason for the marital association is political not love or any sort of emotional bond.

Furthermore, the concept of the marriage as an institute is not brought together to fulfil someone's sexual desires, it is not a medium through which one can satisfy their sexual hunger rather it is the need of the society for their survival and prosperity. Marriage as an institute has a socio-cultural importance rather than individual psychology [2]. To quote, King Henry VIII, known for his six marriages, was the first one to go against the church and remarry in order to bear a son who could ascend the throne. With his first wife he had a girl and later she died. In his second marriage again his wife gave

birth to a girl and because of witch she was beheaded, his third wife died, fourth wife died fifth beheaded and sixth survived as Henry VIII himself died [30]. In cue with the aforesaid, if he actually desired for sexual gratification, he could not have married six times. Being a King, acquiring all the powers, he could have fulfilled his sexual desires by any means for which marriage is not a compulsion.

Marriage as a compulsory institution for bearing a male heir to ascend the throne can be said to be a reason why Cersei and Robert Barithan marry despite the fact that they don't lead a happy married life. Robert never wins her trust and never gives her any happiness and Jamie becomes the outlet of these two prominent human needs.

Ralph Fevre in *The Demoralization of Western Culture* comments upon how there exists a shift from unhappy marriages towards divorce in contemporary era, as he claims, "unhappy marriages increasingly replaced with divorces as people go off to try their luck a second, third or fourth time in the hope of finding someone who thinks in the right way" [31]. In *Game of Thrones* the backdrop of the series is the medieval era where in divorce has zero per cent reflection. One can suggest that since divorce doesn't find any trace in the medieval era, so the queen here opts for incest due to her unhappy marriage. Rather than staying with Robert Barithan unhappily, she chooses her happiness and her desires which she attains from her brother, Jamie. In her conversation with Ned Stark, she justifies her stance as she avers:

Cersei Lannister: "My brother is worth a thousand of your friend."

Ned Stark: "Your brother... or your lover?"

Cersei Lannister: "The Targaryens wed brothers and sisters for three hundred years to keep bloodlines pure. Jaime and I are more than brother and sister, we shared a womb, came into this world together, we belong together."

— Cersei Lannister to Ned Stark [21].

Her happiness with her brother is beyond the worldly taboos or the morals that society puts forth. Being a strong character of the series, she is an active agent who acts autonomously despite constricting social sanctions. Promoting a rethinking of agency in terms of subversion of social order, her character gives prominence to happiness rather than supporting an unhappy marriage.

## Conclusion

Incest is undoubtedly a taboo but its wide eminence in myths, literature as well as in the contemporary visual media surely needs an inquisitive study. The research investigated the fostering of incest in *Game of Thrones* and claimed that unhappy marriage, childhood love, individuality and self-surveillance were the harbingers for incestuous relationship between brother and sister. Further, as an emblem of individuality and freedom of libido, Cersei reflects the conception that creativity is possible once libido is free and once there is no control on libido then there are possibilities

that society will advance, liberating itself from taboos and prejudiced mental constructs. Contemporary media, by presenting the earlier 'unpresentable'; accepting the 'unacceptable', is in a way altering viewer's perspective towards it.

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