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## **The Incestuous Siblings of *Outer Dark*: More Sinned Against than Sinners**

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with the sexual deviants of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *Outer Dark* which tells the tale of two incestuous siblings. The siblings have become the consideration of several critics who label them as sinners bearing the wages of their sin by living a miserable life. The paper has taken an in-depth analysis of the condition of the siblings as well as their illicit union. The study develops the concept of incest since the earliest times, taking references from religious as well as fictional literature. It attempts to present the siblings as less sinners and more sinned against. Precisely, the paper intends to mitigate the charges of incest on the siblings by laying bare the circumstances of their miserable existence.

**Key Words:** Incest. Sin, Society, Rules, Misery.

McCarthy's second novel *Outer Dark*, published in 1968, is grotesque in plot and characterisation. The setting of the story is quite ambiguous and symbolic, but this ambiguity does not place the plot outside the social context. The sinister locale of *Outer Dark* creates a stimulating and frightening atmosphere. The residence of Culla and Rinthy is a secluded cabin unvisited by anyone for the last three months. The plot begins on Culla Holme who has just awakened after a dream in which he has been asking a prophet about curing himself. Rinthy, who is in the end stage of her pregnancy, is inflicted with labor pain and awakens Culla, who is the only person present there. As the narrative unveils, it is indicated that Culla and Rinthy are siblings and Rinthy is bearing Culla's child. Rinthy's predicament is miserable and further deteriorates but no doctor or even a midwife is called for and she adamantly bears her pain, with Culla doing petty things and acting as a mere spectator. Rinthy, after much pain and difficulty, gives birth to the child. Being too weak and unable to move, she asks Culla about her child and he responds to her that it is a baby-boy. Culla further tells her that the baby is weak and looks ill; he asks her to sleep for some time. While she is sleeping, he takes the boy to the forest, leaves him there and tells Rinthy later that the boy, being ill, has died. Rinthy later discovers her brother's lie and sets out to find the baby. Culla, on finding his sister has gone, leaves the house too. Thus begins the journey of the characters who keep on wandering throughout. Jay Ellis has related the plot of the novel with Oedipus myth, asserting that the story of Oedipus is quite familiar to that of Culla Holme. A shepherd takes away the abandoned child in Oedipus myth while in *Outer Dark*, it is done by a tinker. Culla abandons the child as it is a product of incest and its presence may become a cause of distress for Culla. Oedipus's father abandons the child because of a prophecy of a soothsayer, while Culla abandons his son after committing an unsocial act. "Culla cannot allow this child's existence beyond the cabin and immediately surrounding woods in which he has committed this crime . . . the crime already belongs to the father in his sin" (J. Ellis

115). Julian Drury, while analysing the novel in the essay “American Oedipus: Blindness and Fate in Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark*” makes the following proclamation:

Cormac McCarthy’s novel *Outer Dark* is an oedipal work, a haunting and seminal tale of mankind’s blindness, set against a bleak backdrop. The novel’s greatest theme is connected to a sense of unwilling blindness, which points strongly to theme related to the Greek Tragedy of Oedipus. It seems, in a way, McCarthy’s novel is an American Oedipus, a journey through the dark lands of rural Appalachia in search of the dark truth.

The concept of “unwilling blindness” applies to Culla who unwillingly turns blind to the sufferings of his sister as well as his son and handles them carelessly. He becomes least concerned about Rinthy during her pregnancy and abandons their new born child in the woods. He is aware of the gravity of his act but he feels compelled to do so under the societal pressure. Like king Oedipus who feels instigated to blind himself after realising the truth, Culla also turns his back to his responsibility as a father. Culla thus casts himself into the world of misery, guilt, blame, punishment and seclusion.

Rinthy and Culla, being one of the odd characters of McCarthy, have deviated from the sexual norms of the society. Sexual conduct in every society is governed by certain customs, conventions and rules and the person who does not follow these attributes is considered an anti social person. Society lays down its rules regarding the different sorts of behaviours of an individual in the society in which he/she lives. Sex, being an essential part of an individual’s life is also governed by certain rules which a society expects its members to emulate. Being a hush-hush matter, people are not expected to openly talk about their sexual aspects of their lives. If a person does something unusual in this matter, it often shocks the other people. The person challenging social norms is considered a deviant in sexual matters or, in other word, a sexual deviant. Richard Tewksbury defines sexual deviance as, “Sexual deviance . . . refers to the behaviours that involve individuals seeking erotic gratification through means that are considered odd, different or unacceptable to either most or influential persons in one’s community.” As Meridith G F. Worthen in *Sexual Deviance and Society* proclaims that law and order keeps on changing and what might be deviant at one point of time may not be so after some period of time. For example, homosexual relationships that have been despised in the past are now accepted. “Sexual deviance,” Worthen says, —is therefore a process related to norms about sex, sexuality, race, culture, law and criminal culpability”(3). Rinthy and Culla’s relationship is also shocking and sinful to society in general as such type of relationship is reproved in the society. Hence Rinthy and Culla are sexual deviants; that is why they are living away from the common people. Melissa Davis in *Barren Silent and Godless: Southern Novels of Cormac McCarthy* has examined the diverging views of Rinthy and Culla about their guilt. While Culla is running away from his act and trying to deny its occurrence, Rinthy recognises her sin and accepts it. This unending journey of both of them has commenced under the pretext of having violated the incest taboo. Incest refers to the sexual relationship between family relations, particularly blood relatives. Oxford dictionary of English defines incest as —sexual activity between two people who are very closely related in a family, for example, a brother and sister and a father and daughter (786). Some societies extend restrictions to milk siblings, step siblings and adoptive siblings as well. The derivative source of incest is a Latin word ‘incestuous’ which means ‘unchaste’ or ‘impure’ (Wikipedia). Elizabeth Archibald, while defining the incestuous relationship makes the following statement, “At present, English law defines incest in the Sexual

Offences Act of 1956 as sexual intercourse between a man and his mother, sister (full or half), daughter or granddaughter, and between a woman over 16 and her father, brother (full or half), son or grandfather” (10). It is customary to marry one’s first cousin in Islam and Christianity, while Hinduism restricts such marriages; even the marriage with the distant cousins is restricted by some communities. In the current phase as well as in the past, incest taboo has been common of all the cultural taboos. A particular illustration is that of ancient Greece where consanguineous marriages have been performed as a move towards preserving the royal lineage. Certainly, different societies and religious groups have placed their own restrictions on consanguineous marriage and intercourse. While some religions accept matrimony between cousins, others deem it prohibited and also do not allow marriage inside one’s own clan. In China, for example, marriage with the first cousin having the same surname is prohibited while it is allowed between cousins with different surnames, “The 1981 Marriage Law of the People’s Republic of China . . . prohibits marriage between couples related as first cousins or closer” (Bittles et al. 789). In other words, marriage with maternal cousin is allowed but not with one’s first cousin (from paternal side). China prohibits first cousin marriage as pointed out in the marriage law of 1981. Correspondingly, North Korea bars blood relation marriages up to third cousin under the auspices of the Family law of 1994 (Bittles et al.). First cousin marriage is illegal in 31 out of 50 states of the U.S. Over decades, divergent views have been prescribed about incest taboo and incest avoidance. There are several references regarding consanguineous marriages in Bible. As, for example, in the Biblical book of Genesis, patriarch Abraham and his wife Sarah have been half-siblings, both being the children of Terah (Gen. 20:12).

Incest has been an imperative idea in American fiction, providing an indication towards the societal reaction to such acts. Leslie A. Fiedler, while analysing the changing trends in the American novel in *Love and Death in American Novel*, refers to the modifications that have taken place in the representation of sexuality in the works of fiction. The birth of sentimental novels has resulted in the introduction of female protagonist in the American novel, followed by the inclusion of the theme of love, seduction and adulterous relations. The novels depict the accidental incest with “illegitimate girls” falling in love with “the legitimate sons of their reformed fathers” also becomes apparent. Such novels usually end with painful revelations leading the character to a single, melancholy, and useful life or death by brain fever (Fiedler 87).

Diverse viewpoints have been presented by different scholars and theorists about the origin of the incest taboo and the outcome of its violation. Edward Westermarck, in his book, *History of Human Marriage* has provided a hypothesis bearing his name, called, ‘The Westermarck hypothesis.’ Westermarck has asserted that childhood association leads to sexual aversion, which turns out to be the reason for incest taboo. He further replicates that this sexual aversion between the childhood associates is the historical source of incest taboo. Since the siblings of the same parents grow up together, they have a sexual resentment towards each other preventing them from incest. Westermarck states, “Those of our ancestors who avoided in-and-in breeding would survive, while the others would gradually decay and ultimately perish. Thus, an instinct would be developed which would be powerful enough, as a rule, to prevent injurious unions” (352). Westermarck further argues that the prohibition of incest is the result of this aversion making it a moral norm to avoid it.

Sigmund Freud, however, has repudiated Westermarck’s hypothesis in his book *Totem and Taboo*, asserting that the repulsion that a person shows towards such relationships is in fact a form of reaction formation to avoid the attraction. Freud claims:

It seems to me very remarkable that Westermarck should consider that this innate aversion to sexual intercourse with those with whom one has been intimate in childhood is also the equivalent in psychological terms of the biological fact that inbreeding is detrimental to the species. A biological instinct of the kind suggested would scarcely have gone so far astray in its psychological expression that, instead of applying to blood relatives (intercourse with whom might be injurious to reproduction), it affected persons who were totally innocuous in this respect, merely because they shared a common home. (143)

Freud further asserts that psycho-analysis finds the aversion theory completely untenable. He insists that earliest sexual inclinations of a youngster are towards an incestuous relation; and if suppressed, it acts as a motive force toward neurosis in later life. So, Freud does not confirm to the Westermarck's theory and believes that human beings are given to sexual attraction to the blood relations. These desires, often considered unlawful and impure, are suppressed by the person under the apprehension of getting punished.

Sigmund Freud, in the very first chapter of *Totem and Taboo* analyses the initiation of various taboos in the society, taking the example of the aboriginal tribes of Australia. In Totemic system of Australia, a person is not allowed to enter into sexual relationship of the member of his own totem. Freud states that the life and culture of primitive man is brought before us through the different monuments and the implements that he has left behind. Freud considers the totem to be the main reason behind the framing of rules regarding exogamy and other sexual restrictions. As he asserts in *Totem and Taboo*, "In almost every place where we find totems we also find a law against persons of the same totem having sexual relations with one another and consequently against their marrying. This then is 'exogamy,' an institution related to totemism" (5). Totem usually included an animal in the clan that is considered holy and is it is forbidden to eat it. Freud believes that the totems, giving rise to taboos and prohibitions, have arrived from this very notion of believing an animal to be sacred. Exemplifying further such tribes, Freud says that in some tribes, a brother and sister have to live away from each other after a certain age and act as strangers if they happen to meet by chance. The same goes to the relationship between father and daughter and son-in-law and mother-in-law.

As per Freud, incest is an 'infantile feature,' particularly in case of neurotic patients. As he declares in *Totem and Taboo* "Psycho-analysis has taught us that a boy's earliest choice of objects for his live is incestuous and that those objects are forbidden ones—his mother and his sister" (19). Freud continues that as the child grows up, he liberates himself from this attraction. A neurotic, Freud maintains, continues to cherish this attraction as he either has failed to free himself from the psycho-sexual attraction or has returned to them. Freud argues that these incestuous wishes, which become unconscious in later part of life, are regarded dangerous by these savage people which must be condemned with strict measures.

Analysing the perspective from the point of view of the novel, it is quite visible that the sexual relationship between Rinthy and Culla is incestuous as they are siblings. Their seclusion from the society is also under the pretext that they have violated a major social taboo of sexual relationship. The relationship between Culla and Rinthy is disgraceful as per the societal norms but an analysis of the conditions prevailing makes it somewhat considerable. Culla and Rinthy have no other relative except each other, no family and friends surround them. The isolationistic motive of McCarthy's first novel *The Orchard Keeper* returns here, mystifying further the mythical environ of the novel, as Jay Ellis has pointed out:

This isolation returns us to the mythic quality of the story, as Culla and Rinthy seem to exist in their cabin like a post-lapsarian Adam and Eve except that they seem at the same time to be the off-spring of Adam and Eve. This, after all, is the implicit problem in the Judeo-Christian origin myth as it first confronts sex: with whom can the son and daughter of Adam and Eve reproduce without committing incest? These siblings seem to be the only people in an inner world surrounded by the outer world *Outer Dark* even after the visit of the tinker, who is repelled by Culla. . . . (118)

The sense of shame in Culla and consequently his running away from his deed has interesting psychological dimensions. There is an internal conflict going on making it difficult for him to bear the sight of his son, who seems like a living image of his sin. In seeking an escape from his guilt, he commits another misdeed of abandoning and indirectly murdering his new born child. Freudian interpretation of societal restrictions on human freedom is widely applicable to Culla, who is tortured by the thought of having challenged one of the major social taboos. In fact, Freudian and Marxist theories have played an important role in the writings of a number of twentieth century American naturalists. Giles makes the following statement regarding the importance of Freud's theories on the characters of the novel:

Freud's theories concerning sexuality and guilt are characterised more overtly in the characterisation of Culla than in that of Rinthy. He is hounded by guilt throughout the novel; and, throughout his quest, he encounters individuals who seem to possess some mysterious knowledge of his sin with Rinthy and who make more or less direct references to it. ("Outer Dark" 98)

Freud has analysed the initiation of various taboos in the society relating them to the totemic values. Freud relates exogamy too to the prevalence of totems that create rules for incest stressing further that instinctual forces act as the promoters of incestuous interest. He elaborates that the increasing restrictions on following totemic rules creates an aversion for such rules. Illustrating the primitive societies, he reflects that the disinclination towards the laws can result in the violation of totems. Freud also connects Totemism's sexual restrictions to the Oedipus Complex. In such a relational analysis, totem is an image of a forefather who, in order to prevent his sons from having the females of the family, has expelled them from his horde. The sons, who have been feeling jealous of father for possessing all the females, unite to kill and devour the father. However, the sons later erect the incest prohibition in order to avoid competition and live together. Since, the brothers want to get themselves identified with their father, the 'deferred obedience' prevails and the father is glorified as god. This illustration explains the origin and continuance of the traditions since the primitive time. The notion of sons returning to avenge their father depicts the instinctual jealousy of the son to possess the female of his family. The assertion further promotes the idea that incest is an inborn impulse. Culla, the convict of incest has been unable to control his primal urges, consequently impregnating his sister. Freud has asserted that the suppression of this primal instinct causes neurosis and aggravates the person's future sexual relationships. The person becomes cold to any feeling of affection for his sexual partner. Culla is also passing through this stage as his mind is somewhat engulfed by the thought of his guilt, making it difficult to attach any concern for Rinthy's wellbeing. He witnesses Rinthy in extreme distress but does not dare to call anybody for assistance due to the fear of his misdeed being exposed. Like Oedipus, the child is abandoned, labelling it a threat to the 'propriety' of the society. Commenting on Culla's banishment of his child, Jay Ellis points out:

After Culla abandons the child in the woods, rather than the son returning to kill father, the son is taken forever. Rinthy of course follows to rescue him. Culla, however, journeys perhaps to recover his sister, but more likely in simple wandering. Sickness has no one left to claim in the Thebes of their abandoned cabin, and instead, the outer world of the novel proves already to have been infected by the same concerns. (118)

Culla has often been considered a sinner by the critics and his sufferings as the result of his sin. But this is not the purpose of this study. The study provides a gaze into the circumstances of Culla's life that lead to the commitment of incest. Considering the suffering of Culla, Erica B. Steakley asserts that Culla is well aware of the seriousness of his act and is feeling guilty about it. She further maintains that Culla is not a determined outlaw since he is haunted by the immorality of his act. Steakley also makes a comparison of the novel with Dante's *Inferno* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; comparing Dante's Satan with the Trio and Culla with Bunyan's Christian. The following statement made by Steakley regarding Culla is pertinent here:

In Contrast to Kenneth Rattner of McCarthy's first novel, Culla Holme is not a wilfully evil man, but rather a painfully ignorant one. If we allow ignorance to function as synonym with innocence, we can see a warped version of Bunyan's Christian in Culla. As far as we know, Culla has committed only one major sin before the beginning of the novel, but his action causes him to abandon the resulting baby boy in the woods. (32)

Culla is a victim of circumstances and the readers are not apprised with the conditions that led to their incestuous promiscuity. The psychological trauma with which he suffers truly suggests that the act might have been unavoidable as they are dwelling in isolation. Similar to the plot of the novel is Deborah Chow's movie *Flowers in the Attic*, in which the characters due to their detachment from the rest of the world, end up having an incestuous relationship with each other. The comparison with the issue of Holme siblings leads to the analysis that in committing the act Culla and Rinthy have succumbed to their aloofness. "Flowers in the Attic" relates the story of four siblings, Chris, Cathy, Carrie and Cory who are left alone in an attic by their mother, Caroline after the death of their father. The elder siblings, Chris and Cathy enter their puberty in the attic and being abandoned by their mother, act as parents to their younger siblings. As the physical transformation takes place in them, Chris and Cathy enter into sexual relationship, confessing their love for each other. Apart from the siblings, the relationship between their parents is also incestuous as Caroline's husband is also her half-uncle and the both have been disowned for getting married. Olivia's (their grandmother) reference to the children as the production of evil and her constant watch over the children indicates a commonly accepted social taboo that the incest begotten children are also incestuous. Olivia hates her grandchildren just because they have been produced through an incestuous union and so are devilish. The children are kept in the attic away from the notice of the other people and especially their grandfather who cannot stand their existence. The situation prevalent in the movie leaves no choice for the siblings as their confrontation with the outside world is completely denied. Being imprisoned inside an attic, they vent their frustration in confronting each other sexually. Like Cathy and Chris, Rinthy and Culla are also alone, having no other relation but themselves, as Culla tells about Rinthy to the old man, "She ain't got no kin but me" (132). Being alone, they might have yielded to the temptation of the moment and indulged in sexual intercourse which they regret later. The social conditions depicted in the novel invoke a greater concern. People are selfish, greedy and indifferent towards other's plight. The religious gentry has also been depicted in a negative light

and are befooling people in the name of religion. This demand greater attention on the part of the social heads who should look into the matter more gravely.

**Conclusion:** The narrative, through its deviant characters, successfully provokes the consideration on an important social issue and one of the major sexual taboos of the society. Through the deviance of Culla and Rinthy, an important social aspect is analysed in contemplation with the societal norms. The circumstances behind which Culla and Rinthy committed the act are not clear; so, they also suffer without the established fault. As already elaborated, varied sociologists and psychologists have dealt with incest as something primitive and natural human desire. So, Culla and Rinthy might have surrendered to the enticement of the moment and committed the act in the absence of any other potential sexual partner. Their secluded dwelling and lack of any associations can also be the reason behind this commission. Furthermore, the siblings are not the intentional violators of the taboo; they both are feeling guilty of their act and are worried of its outcome. Incest may be unintentional, but the next folly that Culla commits is more flagitious, committed under the distress of correcting his first mistake. The society depicted in the novel is no less avaricious. The three unknown men who are lurking the area and killing people recklessly are much more devastating than the 'sibling sinners.' There is so much avarice in the world that the incest of Rinthy and Culla becomes just a minor concern in its comparison. As deviants, the siblings have violated just one taboo, but the violation done against humanity is extensive, making life miserable. If a catastrophe incurs (as Culla envisions in a dream), it can be the result of the general rashness of mankind, not of a single deviant act committed by the innocent.

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