

Illicit Desire and Psychological in Anais Nin's *House of Incest*

Dr. Shreya

Assistant Professor - English

Department of Applied Science and Humanities ,MERI College of Engineering and
Technology, Sampla, Near Asanda, Distt. Jhajjar

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Abstract

Anais Nin's literary works constitutes a bold exploration of human desire, identity, and psychological intricacy, particularly in her portrayal of illicit relationships. The paper analyses how Nin challenges moral conventions by depicting taboo desires, including incest, adultery, and emotional transgressions, as complex psychological entities rather than mere acts of deviance. This study focuses on *House of Incest*, situating Nin within the frameworks of psychoanalysis, modernist experimentation, and feminist philosophy. Her tale conflates the boundaries between self and other, morality and desire, reality and dream, so reflecting the fractured modern psyche. The paper employing Freudian and Jungian ideas, asserts that Nin's portrayal of illicit relationships seeks not to incite but to reveal suppressed facets of human consciousness. The book ultimately positions Nin as a pivotal character who redefines sexuality and identity, highlighting the significant connection between desire and self-actualization.

Keywords: Desire, Psychoanalysis, Modernism, Incest, Identity, Sexuality.

Introduction

The early twentieth century had a profound shift in literary representations of sexuality and identity, significantly shaped with psychoanalytic theory and modernist innovation. Anais Nin holds a unique position among writers who contested traditional moral systems. Her works, particularly *House of Incest*, beyond conventional narrative frameworks to examine the internal realms of desire and psychological disintegration. Nin's writing arises from a profound personal involvement with her experiences, thoroughly

chronicled in *The Diary of Anais Nin*. Her depiction of unlawful relationships, encompassing emotional dependency and prohibited erotic ties, cannot be dismissed as mere sensationalism. They serve as symbolic investigations of the unconscious mind. The title *House of Incest* signifies a figurative realm where distinctions between self and other, subject and object, and moral and immoral dissolve. Nin's storytelling technique, profoundly shaped by surrealism and psychoanalysis, embodies the malleability of identity and the volatility of desire. This paper aims to evaluate how Nin portrays illicit desire not as a societal deviation but as an essential component of human psyche. It also examines how her art subverts patriarchal notions of sexuality, presenting a very subjective and introspective perspective on erotic experience. Nin offered an elucidation in *A Woman Speaks*:

Since a writer, I aimed to integrate diverse artistic expressions into my writing, since I believed that each art form must enrich the others, contributing to a collective enhancement. In every artistic medium, there exists an element I wished to incorporate, and I desired poetic writing to encompass them all. (40)

Nin's fiction, especially her prose-poem *House of Incest*, features a language marked by a distinct synesthetic aspect, despite her never expressly using the term to describe it. She sought to reproduce the sensory experiences of art, dance, and music through rhetorical techniques including symbolism, parallelism, metonymy, and rhythmic repetition. Moreover, the application of cinematic techniques, like intricate portrayals of environments, sudden scene shifts, and progressive fade-outs, was commonly utilised. Furthermore, she included ekphrastic representations of certain artworks and music throughout the narrative, functioning as metaphors to express the emotional ambiance or the inner states of her characters. Critics of Nin's oeuvre frequently emphasise that her early use of non-literary elements in her writing was significantly shaped by her engagement with D.H. Lawrence's emotive and physical linguistic style. Nin praised the bodily and sensuous language of the English writer in her first published essay, "D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study" (1932), "asserting that it may be understood similarly to music, dance, or visual art" (45). The succinct publication was an expanded version of a prior piece that appeared in the Canadian Forum in October 1930, titled 'The Mystic of Sex: A Preliminary Examination of D.H. Lawrence'. During the winter of 1929, Nin encountered Lawrence's *Women in Love* and cultivated a deep affinity with his creative oeuvre and philosophical tenets. She described his novels as solely focused on "the depiction of emotions, sensations, and both conscious and unconscious experiences" (*The*

Early Diary of Anais Nin 34). She “proceeds from the dream outward” (261) to achieve her psychic detachment from June through the creation of the prose poetry. *House of Incest* in which she elucidates the dilemma:

I AM THE OTHER FACE OF YOU
THIS IS THE BOOK YOU WROTE
AND YOU ARE THE WOMAN
I AM. (27)

The oppressive structure depicted in Nin’s visions represents the complex network of incestuous desire that surrounds June and Nin. She describes her relationship with June as incestuous, as articulated in the poem: “If only we could all escape from this house of incest, where we only love ourselves in the other” (70). Alan in "Mirrors and Reflections: Identity in Modern Literature" characterises desire as akin to an incestuous self-attachment, which may be disconcerting for individuals who cherish their uniqueness and fear its loss, describing it as “the prospect of endless self-duplication” in her obsession with her mirror image (79). In *House of Incest*, Nin and June traverse the labyrinth of dreams together. The individuals remain restricted; nonetheless, they recognise the necessity of traversing the minuscule aperture, effectively passing the conceptual zero point, to attain liberation and re-enter the symbolic realm. Nonetheless, akin to the death drive, this notion evokes both trepidation and longing within them:

We were incredulous that the tunnel would emerge into sunshine; we dreaded being ensnared in darkness once more and worried returning to our previous location. The tunnel would constrict and diminish as we progressed; it would envelop us, tightening more and suffocating us. It would get dense and constricted, suffocating us as we proceeded...Nevertheless, we were aware that beyond the abode of incest lay daylight. (*House of Incest 70*)

In the prose poem, both female characters are confined within the domicile of incest, whereas Nin, as the author, achieves liberation through the act of narrative construction via words. In the novel *House of Incest*, Nin delineates a distinction between herself and the character June by describing June through language and depicting her as the character Sabina, so amplifying the divide between them. In June, Nin encounters a blank slate, a tabula rasa, onto which she might project her identity. She discovers her authentic character, particularly her distinctive viewpoint, while seeing the reflective surface of June. Nin's narcissism stems from her obsession with June as a construct of her imagination. When Nin focuses on creating June through language, she frees herself from introspective contemplation and delineates a separation between June and herself via written

representation. Lacan, in “Lacan, the Death Drive, and the Theory of the Symbolic,” asserts that “the word kills the thing” (8). The representation of June within a framework of signification constructs an image of her in the symbolic realm, wherein the self and the other are delineated, compelling June to exist as separate and distinct from her own image. In the final scene of *House of Incest*, a dancer, referred to as an ‘armless woman,’ does a solo dance only for her own enjoyment inside the setting of this *House of Incest*. Her absence of arms renders her incapable of grasping or holding anything, hence she cannot “clutch at the lovely moments of life” (71).

The dancer symbolises Nin's conflict with her own egotism and her inability to disengage from her individual experiences. Nonetheless, the dancer executes the act of dancing “towards daylight” (72), which we can interpret as the poem's ultimate finish and its completion in written expression. Nin's literary form encompasses the totality of incestuous desire within a framework that serves as “a symbolic acceptance for all the inhabitants” of the *House of Incest* and “separations... resolving the narcissistic dilemma in abstract form” (89). Nin repudiates June to preserve her identity as a writer, as authors must interact with the Symbolic realm to utilise language effectively. Nin abstains from imposing moral judgement on her characters or their aspirations. She depicts illicit connections as integral to the overarching human need for purpose and connection. Gaston Bachelard thinks that locations, particularly houses in literature, frequently represent the inner self. Nin's ‘house’ serves as a metaphorical framework for the manifestation of psychological tensions. Critic Edmund Wilson observes that Nin's oeuvre “examines the boundaries of experience where traditional morality inadequately addresses the intricacies of human emotions” (194).

Anais Nin's *House of Incest* defies linear explanation, operating as a psychological and symbolic work. The representation of forbidden relationships in the work should be interpreted through the lens of Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious, especially his concepts of repressed urges and taboo impulses. Freud's Oedipus complex offers a framework for analysing Nin's examination of incest as a metaphor for unresolved psychological conflicts. Nin transcends Freud's clinical detachment. Her work aligns more closely with Carl Jung, particularly his concepts of the collective unconscious and archetypal imagery. The ‘house’ in *House of Incest* symbolises the psyche, with its concealed rooms signifying repressed wants and fears. Nin perceives illicit connections not as exterior moral transgressions but as intrinsic psychic realities. The demarcation between permissible and prohibited disintegrates, illustrating the volatility of human identity. Desire serves as a dual force that both shapes and undermines the self. Nin portrays female desire

as assertive rather than submissive. Her art fights patriarchal standards that restrict women's sexuality within moral confines. Kate Millett contends that Nin's writing signifies "a radical departure from conventional portrayals of female sexuality, emphasising desire as a locus of power rather than oppression" (34). The disjointed, dreamlike composition of *House of Incest* corresponds with surrealist principles. The narrative blurs traditional boundaries between reality and fantasy, reflecting the fluid nature of desire.

In works like *House of Incest*, stemming from this initial inquiry into the unconscious, Nin forges a trajectory for further explorations of a comparable type. She activates psychic pathways in her mind that allow Imaginary vision to subvert the Symbolic order, so establishing her distinctive style of feminine writing, termed *l'écriture féminine*. Friedman and Fuchs assert that her writing "disrupts conventional narrative" through a "nonlinear, polyphonic, open-ended" structure in both her diaries and other works, "subverting hegemonic forms," such as Henry Miller's rigid realism, "and arising...out of the...primary processes" of the Imaginary (Signets 4). Nin's metaphorical interpretation of feminine creative force and language corresponds with that of French feminist Helene Cixous. She addresses a male-centric approach to language in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," where she contends that "women must write through their bodies" (342). Cixous correlates the inclination to conceive with the aspiration to write, describing it as "the desire to live the self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood" (346).

Lacan asserts that the phallus functions as the symbol of authority, regulating the Symbolic Order and language. According to Luce Irigaray in *This Sex which is Not One*, a woman "appropriates that organ for herself" in the act of writing (350), "masquerading" as masculine to get linguistic power. Lacan, in *Feminine Sexuality*, asserts that "masquerade is the very definition of 'femininity' precisely because it is constructed with reference to a male sign" (43). Irigaray asserts that the symbolic system's inclination towards the masculine metaphor of the penis/phallus as a representation of creativity is entirely alien to the feminine. This pertains to both the fundamental concept being communicated and the manner of its articulation. The total feminine portion of human consciousness is under-represented, except for its function as a negation or an incomplete inside the symbolic framework. Lacan asserts that "a woman's sexuality is inextricably linked to the representations that produce it; images and symbols associated with women cannot be detached from those representations" (*Feminine Sexuality* 43). Nin's profound obsession with her father culminated when he coerced her into participating in an incestuous relationship in adulthood. Nin first revelled in her ultimate triumph and the

acknowledgement she finally garnered from her father, substituting incest with sexual liberation.

Conclusion

Anais Nin's *House of Incest* is a revolutionary study of forbidden passion and psychological intricacy. Nin encourages readers to explore the concealed aspects of the psyche. Her depiction of prohibited relationships is not to incite outrage but to elucidate the complex interaction among desire, identity, and consciousness. Nin's creative storytelling style and introspective depth defy literary standards and cultural norms. Her work foreshadows subsequent feminist and psychoanalytic discussions, establishing her as a pivotal character in contemporary literature. Nin's literature implies that comprehending human desire necessitates transcending strict moral structures and accepting the complexities of the psyche. In her work, illicit connections serve as a lens that elucidates the complexity of human existence.

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