

Research Article

Incest Revealed in the Work of Niki Saint Phalle

Michelle Morin*

Department of Psychosomatician, University of Paris V, Paris, France

Abstract

Niki Saint Phalle revealed her incest at age sixty two in a book called “*My Secret*”. She revealed it also unconsciously before in the pictural, sculptural and cinematographic work. (a woman protecting herself from a dragon a self portrait with a double mouth, the Nanas, the love mouth of the Stavinski fountain), Freud the first showed us the path with the interpretation of the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci. The incest had consequences: self-arm, feelings of being excluded from the society, impossibility to tell her mother, headaches, hate towards her father, a breakdown and no recognition. of psychiatrists The sublimation in painting and sculpture, and in her movie Daddy was a way to elaborate the sexual traumatism. She was able to develop an imaginary life thanks to her hysterical personality. Creation helped her to feel better and sooth anxiety, shame and guilt. Her book *My Secret* can be considered as a self-analysis. The rape developed in her, fantasies and sadistic sexual drives by identification to the aggressor that we find in her movie Daddy. Her book “*My secret*” brings the material like in a psychoanalytic session with free association. Niki Saint Phalle did a remarkable self-analysis of her sexual traumatism, with words.

Keywords

Incest, Sublimation, Art Creation, Literature Creation, Applied Psychoanalysis

1. Introduction

Niki Saint Phalle revealed her incest at age sixty-two in a book called “*My Secret* [13] but she revealed it also unconsciously before, in her pictural, sculptural and cinematographic work. [6] This is a way to elaborate the traumatism and to sublimate the sexual drives [2].

Sigmund Freud, [4] the first, showed the path. In his interpretations of the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci, he considers the smile of Mona Lisa, Saint John Baptist, Virgin Mary as the reminiscence of his mother’s smile. Leonardo was separated from his mother at the age of one. [5].

I discovered Niki Saint Phalle in an exhibit in Paris at the Grand Palais. I didn’t knew anything about her. In the first room on the left was a giant Nana with legs spread and a large

entrance through the vaginal opening. I thought immediately that she had been raped. I was wright.

Fortunately tongues are loosening and a few women dare to lift the silence on the unthinkable: Christine Angot in *An impossible love* [1] Andrea Bescond in *The Ticles* [3] and a pioneer Ana ĩ Nin in the *Journal of incest* [8].

A biography [12] tells us that Niki was born in 1930, a year after the stock market crash that will ruin her father. She has a double identity: one from her American mother coming from a very wealthy family and the other from a French father, a New York businessman, count of Saint Phalle, descendant of an aristocratic family, a long line that goes back to Saint Louis. Incest can even happen in that sort of family!

The count of Saint Phalle is a fickle father, he cheats on his

*Corresponding author: michelle.morin75@orange.fr (Michelle Morin)

Received: 10 July 2025; **Accepted:** 29 July 2025; **Published:** 19 August 2025



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wife while she is pregnant with Niki, who was born with a circular cord and almost choked to death.

Her older brother of two years and she at birth were abandoned to the paternal grand-parents in France for three years in a castle with servants and a very sadistic grand-father. When Niki is back in America she suffers from night terrors.

Dismissed from the sisters of the Sacred Heart, she spent a year with the maternal grand-parents where she discovers good reading (the Tales of Grimm, the Countess of Segur and Edgar Poe).

In 1942, Niki is eleven years old but looks like thirteen. She is a beautiful tall girl. During the summertime in a house rented in New England, her father rapes her. She loved her father: it is a great shock and she will never forgive him.

2. The Written Work: “My Secret”

“My secret” [13] can be considered as a self-analysis, an elaboration of the sexual traumatism. It is written in December 1992, at the age of sixty two, in the form of a letter to her daughter Laura forty one years old and will be published two years later.

Niki is then married to Jean Tinguely her second husband, a sculptor. She has two children from her first husband Harry Matthews, a son Philip and a daughter Laura. Her father died in 1967 twenty years ago. She is a well-known painter and sculptor.

1) The snake dance

She makes a link between two snakes dancing on a rock and the dead body of one of them in her bed. Afraid, she slept with her cousin of twenty years old, shocking for her parents.

2) The sexual traumatism

The same summer she goes to a garden shed with her father to get a fishing rod. *“My father, thirty years old, slips his hand into my panties.” “My father this banker, this aristocrat, put his sex in my mouth”*. She feels shame, pleasure, anxiety and fear. This is the realization of the incestuous desires of an adolescent. She underlines her ambivalence. Her love for her father turned to contempt.

Her father breaks the ban, the taboo of incest and denies the difference between generation. The sexual relation appears to have been limited to touching and oral sex. The biographer says that she was still a virgin when she married.

3) Consequences of the sexual traumatism

She feels excluded from society. Her father becomes an object of hatred. She deforms her upper lips with self-mutilations and must resort to surgery.

At the age of twenty-two, she undergoes electroshock and insulin shock in a psychiatric clinic. This is a heavy treatment for a melancholic state! She carries weapons on her to defend herself. Her father, upset by her internment, will confess his fault in a letter. *“Do you remember when you were eleven I tried to treat you like my mistress”*. Migraines appear, For the psychosomatic psychoanalysts this means she does not want to remember...She shows the letter to her psychiatrist who

burns it. The denial of the psychiatrist is terrible for her, no recognition of the sexual traumatism!

She will then start painting: this is a sublimation of her aggressive drives and a way to heal. [7].

The death of her father in 1947 when she is forty-seven years old will be a shock. It is difficult to mourn the loss of a parent you hate.

3. The Cinematographic Work: Daddy

Five years after the death of her father, her movie Daddy is a first attempt to reveal the incestuous behavior of her father but it will only cause a scandal.

The director is also her lover. She plays her own role and another lover the role of her father! It is the story of the tender relationship between a little girl and her father. He tries to undress her. In her movie, Niki gives free rein to her fantasies and her anger, she tramples on the father and kills him. Far from appeasing her, the movie will trigger off a nervous breakdown. Her companion Jean Tinguely, her family and the press are outraged. Only her mother and Lacan defends her.

After the scandal the director made a second version: a girl (played by a friend of Niki) will seduce her father and subject him to sodomy with a giant phallus! The movie is compared to the Marquis de Sade and Lolita of Nabokov.

Shortly after the film was released, she had lunch with her mother. *“I know everything. I opened the letter of Dr Cossa to your father and he confessed everything to me. I wanted to throw myself through the window. If my father had done that, I would have never talked to him again.”* Why did she never told her daughter?

At least somebody understands the terrible traumatism of her eleven years, condemns her father and defends her. A secret connivance will be established between her and her mother.

4. The Pictural and Sculptural Work

We can find the sexual traumatism in her art creations. [6]

1) The pictural work

In 1958, seventeen years after the traumatism, *Pink nude with a dragon* shows a woman with long hair protecting her sex from a dragon. We have the impression to see mouths with big lips everywhere. We immediately think of sexual touching and fellatio. The dragon symbolizes her father.

In a self-portrait a year later you can see a fragmented body with a neck brace around its neck with a sad and ugly face with a double mouth. It evokes the self-mutilation and reconstruction surgery.

Daddy in 1970 shows a Janus with a double face. On the left the hated father with a piercing gaze and a sensual lip. On the right the beloved father.

In 1972, The Devouring mothers can represent the couple of her parents naked. The mother has a large breast and pink

nipples. The sex is well highlighted. A man with a dozen of phallus can be a probable allusion to the father who cheats on his wife with numerous mistresses.

2) The sculptural work

Twenty-four years after the incest, Niki creates her Nanas with a monstrous body, a small head and large breast. The legs spread shows the female sex. They are painted polyester statues with hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades of the playing cards. Another Nana called Crucifixion evokes the body of a whore with black fishnet stockings, a suspender belt and high heels.

For the poster of an exhibit in Stockholm; the director of the museum asked her a giant Nana with a vaginal entrance. The sexual traumatism is exposed to the sight of everybody.

The Stavinsky fountain exposed in front of the Centre Pompidou in Paris is called *The Love Mouth*. We make of course the relation with the fellatio of her eleven years, which is on display to all to see.

5. Results

Niki wonders why she did not tell her mother after the incest. She was ashamed of her body with the Catholic idea of sin.

A strict and repressive education

At home the children were not allowed to speak. One wrong word and it was a slap. Niki thinks that if she had spoken to her mother, her father would have denied and beaten her. She did not say anything to anybody. For her it was a survival strategy. Her silence isolated her from the others. If she had denounced her father he would have stop loving her. So it is also to keep the love of her father.

Manifestations of her anger and revolt

Niki made herself unbearable during the family meals with ticks and grimaces. She ate her meals in the kitchen. She stole from stores candies and books. She provoked the Sisters. She said that she was an atheist and insulted God during Communion. Niki painted in red the vine leaves covering the sex of statues. Did she cover the sex of her father or her own sex who suffered sexual touching? She considered this act of painting as her first artistic act.

The denial of the psychiatrists

She consulted psychiatrists, all men, which instead of helping her verbalize the trauma, they made her feel even more guilty "*No man can resist the perverse seduction a little girl!*" They turned her into Lolita.

Probably informed on the subject, she wonders if her father was raped in his childhood. She tries to mitigate her father's responsibility. He could be a victim also.

The rape at eleven years old isolated her. She learned to cope with and survive the trauma. This is called resilience. Niki says: "*This forced solitude created space in me to write my first poems and develop an inner life, which would make me later an artist*".

Racamier considers incest as an anti-Oedipus, an unfortunate derivative of narcissistic seduction, between psychosis

and perversion. It is the secret of so many disturbing pathology poorly understood. [11]

Helene Parat develops the concept of the prohibition of incest and the role in the psychoanalytic theory of the Oedipus complex and the prohibitions that result from it. [9, 10]

6. Conclusion

Sublimation and creation will allow Niki Saint Phalle to elaborate the traumatism through painting, sculpture, movie and writing. She was able to develop an imaginary life thanks to her hysterical personality. Creation helped her to feel better and to sooth anxiety, shame and guilt. In her book "*My Secret*" she gives us a remarkable clinical observation of her rape and the consequences. After the death of her father she tried to liberate herself in a cinematographic work.

An incestuous climate reigns in this family. The two brothers (father and his brother) married the two sisters (mother and her sister). Her father acts his incestuous desires for his daughter and Niki is in love with her cousin (double cousin) and she wants to have sex with him but he refuses, conscious of the taboo of incest. This is a way of identifying with her father and the aggressor.

Racamier, in his book *Incest and incestuous*, proposes the study of a new pathology between psychosis and perversion, the incestuous, an incestuous climate in the family without the acting but in Niki's family there is first the acting of the father and then her attempt of acting with her cousin. [11]

The rape developed in her, fantasies and sadistic sexual drives by identification to the aggressor that we can find in her movie Daddy. We can find the same thing in the painting of Artemisia Gentileschi after the rape by a colleague of her father (the act of beheading in Judith and Holofernes).

The book *My secret* brings the material like in a psychoanalytic session with free association. A biography helps to understand the repetition in her life and to make links. At the age of sixty-two years, Niki Saint Phalle did a remarkable self-analysis of her sexual traumatism, with words this time.

Author Contributions

Michelle Morin is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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