

Between Two Worlds: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Rose Hsu Jordan in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*

Prof. R.P. Singh¹, Shaiwal Kanaujia²

¹Senior Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow, rpsingh.lu@gmail.com

²Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages
University of Lucknow, shaiwal0103@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper explores Rose Hsu Jordan's psychological journey in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* using Sigmund Freud's model of the mind. Rose, the daughter of Chinese immigrant An-mei Hsu, faces a deep internal conflict. The paper examines how the id, ego, and superego interact in Rose's actions, especially regarding her marriage to Ted Jordan, her tendency to depend on others excessively, and her eventual move toward self-assertion. The immigrant context shapes this internal struggle. Her mother's values create a demanding, conflicted superego, while American cultural norms fuel the id's desire for freedom and independence. Caught between these influences, Rose's ego becomes passive. This paper views that passivity not as a flaw but as a rational response to conflicting psychological pressures. By using Freud's model and the trans-generational trauma concept articulated by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, along with insights from Salman Akhtar on immigration, it argues that Rose's experience sheds light on broader patterns in the lives of second-generation immigrants. Close reading of the text supports these theoretical claims throughout.

Keywords: second generation immigrants, id, ego, superego, mother-daughter relationship, transgenerational trauma

Introduction

Published in 1989, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* has received ongoing critical interest for its exploration of cultural identity, female experience, and the pressures immigration places on family relationships. Critics such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong and Shirley Geok-lin Lim have analyzed the novel's treatment of Asian American identity and feminist literary traditions. However, less attention has focused on the psychological depth of the individual daughters, particularly how the psychoanalytic aspects of their characterization allow Tan to depict more than general cultural tension. Rose Hsu Jordan, one of the four American-born daughters at the heart of the novel, exemplifies this. Her passivity,

chronic indecision, and eventual movement toward self-assertion represent a path that Freudian psychoanalytic theory illuminates clearly.

This paper employs Freud's structural model of the mind, which divides psychological life into the id, ego, and superego, to analyze Rose's character. Freud fully presented this model in *The Ego and the Id* (1923), explaining that these three agencies are not fixed but dynamic processes constantly in negotiation. The id seeks immediate gratification based on the pleasure principle, while the superego acts as an internalized authority, reflecting the prohibitions and ideals absorbed from parents and culture. The ego mediates between these two forces and the demands of external reality, trying to satisfy desires without creating guilt or punishment. When this mediation fails, the ego often resorts to defensive strategies like repression, regression, and displacement, as documented in Freud's clinical writings.

Rose's psychological landscape aligns closely with this framework. Her superego is shaped by her mother An-mei's values, influenced by her history of loss, cultural suppression, and gendered silence in pre-revolutionary China. The id is fueled by American cultural promises of romance, individual choice, and the right to personal happiness. The ego, pulled in conflicting directions, often behaves passively. Rose doesn't make decisions; she lets others decide for her. The novel traces the slow, painful journey by which her ego starts to regain its ability to mediate. The final scene, where she refuses to sign divorce papers and claims the house, clearly marks this recovery.

This analysis reaches beyond one character. Scholars like Akhtar and those studying immigrant literature have noted that second-generation individuals occupy a unique position, where two distinct cultural systems pressure a single psyche simultaneously, often without the symbolic resources needed for integration. Rose's narrative illustrates this predicament in a way that faithfully reflects psychological reality, making psychoanalytic close reading both viable and revealing.

The Immigrant Mother and the Formation of the Superego

Freud's account of superego formation, developed in *The Ego and the Id* and expanded in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), asserts that the superego is not merely a set of external rules. It reflects the emotional residue of early relationships, especially with parental figures, whose authority the child first perceives as external and then gradually internalizes as conscience. This process is complex. The child does not simply mimic the parent; instead, they absorb the emotional climate of their relationship, including anxieties, silences, and unspoken expectations. Freud states that the superego "represents the claims of morality," but those claims are colored by the specific history of attachment that created them (Freud, *Ego and the Id* 49). For Rose, this history is influenced by the immigrant experience, making the superego particularly unstable.

An-mei Hsu's own development has been marked by trauma. Her mother became a concubine and

ultimately took her own life to secure her future. From this, she learned the costs of silence and the importance of using one's voice. However, this lesson emerged within a Chinese cultural framework that often conflicts with the American setting in which Rose grows up. The communication between mother and daughter isn't about clear lessons but the underlying anxiety surrounding voice, visibility and the threats tied to female desire. She absorbs this anxiety without understanding its full context. As a result, the superego shaped by her mother's influence is demanding in a vague, relentless way. It establishes expectations she feels but cannot articulate, making those vague expectations psychologically burdensome because they cannot be satisfied through any specific action.

Scholars examining Asian American literature have noted this dynamic. E. D. Huntley points out that in Tan's work, the relationship between Chinese mothers and American-born daughters often involves "the transmission of unarticulated expectation." Here, mothers convey their desires not through direct instruction but through the emotional nuances of their presence (Huntley 72). Wendy Ho's analysis of the novel in *In Her Mother's House* similarly emphasizes how maternal authority communicates through indirect means gesture, story and silence creating a pressure felt by daughters, who may not always recognize its source (Ho 90). Both perspectives align with the Freudian framework, as the superego's demands are experienced as one's own conscience, not an external voice. This internalization is what grants them their power.

Additionally, the ideas of Abraham and Torok regarding the 'transgenerational phantom' apply to Rose's connection with her mother's history. They argue in *The Shell and the Kernel* that unresolved losses can become encoded within the psyche and passed down through generations, impacting descendants who lack conscious awareness of the original events. An-mei has never fully mourned her mother's death or reconciled the conflicted feelings about her own survival. This unresolved grief influences the unconscious environment Rose grows up in. She may not know what weighs on her, but she feels burdened. The superego formed under these conditions is divided. One part stems from Chinese values of endurance, loyalty and suppressing individual desire. The other part reflects American expectations of self-determination and personal fulfillment. Neither perspective is strong enough to dominate the other.

The Id and the Desire for Belonging: Rose's American Self

If Rose's superego echoes her mother's voice and the history she carries, the id expresses itself in a distinctly American way. It seeks what American culture taught her to desire: romantic love, belonging, individual happiness, and freedom from collective obligations. Freud describes the id as operating solely on the pleasure principle, pushing for satisfaction without negotiation (Freud, *Introductory Lectures* 313). In her case, these desires are not trivial or solely selfish. They represent legitimate aspirations of someone raised in a culture that fully endorses them. The challenge is that the superego either does not

validate these desires or does so only ambiguously.

Rose's relationship with Ted Jordan serves as the primary space where the id's desires can be expressed. He is white, educated and confidently American in his demeanor. He knows what he wants and actively pursues it. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, her attraction to him is not only romantic. By aligning herself with Ted's decisiveness, she can fulfill the id's need for security and meet the superego's expectation of finding stability, all while avoiding the daunting task of establishing her own internal authority. His confidence fills the void of her own. This solution, while neurotic in Freud's sense, addresses immediate issues by complicating the deeper conflict. Yet it is an entirely human response, and the novel presents it with consideration rather than disdain.

The id's desire for belonging reflects a need for a clear identity. Wong's analysis in *Reading Asian American Literature* highlights this. She argues that second-generation Asian Americans often feel pressured to pick between cultural identities due to the dominant culture's push for identities to be singular and clear (Wong 122). Rose's marriage to Ted illustrates this struggle. By marrying a white American man, she seeks to create an identity that feels stable. Through this romantic relationship, she hopes to resolve an internal confusion. The id pushes for this resolution to alleviate the ongoing low-grade anxiety of navigating between worlds. The superego, however, resists, viewing this resolution as a betrayal of everything her mother's world signifies.

What's significant is that Rose is not fully aware of these dynamics. She sees herself as a woman without strong opinions. She genuinely defers to others, believing their judgment is superior to hers. This image is part of the id's strategy, if she doesn't acknowledge her own desires, she can't be blamed for indulging them. This repression supports the id's need to avoid guilt and the superego's demand for hidden desires. The ego, as we will see, pays the price for this arrangement.

The Ego in Crisis: Passivity as Psychological Defense

Freud consistently portrays the ego sympathetically. He describes it as a pressured agency juggling three demanding forces: the id, the superego and the outside world. When any of these forces become too intense, the ego resorts to defenses like repression, regression, projection, displacement and rationalization. These are not signs of weakness but efforts to manage impossible demands with limited resources. In *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926), Freud notes that the ego's main aim is to avoid anxiety and its defensive actions are the strategies it uses to achieve this (Freud, *Inhibitions* 82). Rose's passivity is the clearest of her defensive actions.

From the perspective of ego economics, passivity allows for a kind of avoidance. If Rose never takes a stand, she cannot be blamed for what follows. If she never shows a desire, she cannot be told that

desire is wrong. The ego shields itself from the anxiety of potential failure or moral judgment by refusing to act. This represents repression at the level of action, not just thought, as it prevents feelings from leading to behaviors. Ted, observing this, senses that living with Rose feels like living with no one at all. The ego's defense strategy creates a self that barely acknowledges its own existence.

Regression, another of Freud's central defense mechanisms, also appears in Rose's behavior. When she is in crisis, she reaches out to her mother at strange hours. On one level, this is just a daughter seeking comfort. On another, it reflects a return to a previous mode of functioning where her mother's authority defined her world. This regression gives the ego a temporary break from its impossible task by reinstating the primary parental authority that the superego was meant to replace. It is not a solution, but a pause. Tan captures this ambivalence, showing that these calls offer Rose only partial comfort since her mother cannot address her needs in a way she understands.

The most significant sign of the ego's crisis is the marriage itself, viewed not as a relationship but as a psychological structure. In marrying Ted, Rose externalizes her ego functions. She assigns to him the tasks of making decisions, expressing preferences and acknowledging desires that a fully functioning ego typically handles internally. Freud recognized this pattern, though he never labeled it as such. Later psychoanalytic writers, especially in the object-relations tradition, describe this as 'projective identification.' The ego, unable to handle certain functions, places them in another person, relating to that person as if they are an external version of its lost inner abilities (Klein 12). Rose's dependence on Ted reflects this. She is not simply lazy or lacking. She has cleverly turned her deficiency into a relational structure.

This structure fails when Ted withdraws. This marks the start of the ego crisis with Rose in the midst of a divorce. She feels unable to act, calls her mother, sees a therapist who uses a language her mother doesn't understand, and confronts her own passivity with new clarity. This collapse is not a failure. In psychoanalytic terms, it is a crisis that holds the potential for restructuring. When Ted leaves, the ego loses its external support but might gain the ability to build an internal one.

The Mother-Daughter Wound and the Language of Silence

One formal aspect that sets *The Joy Luck Club* apart from typical novels is its effort to show both sides of the generational divide. We see not only the daughters trying to understand their mothers but also the mothers grappling with what they have been able to provide. An-mei's story is key to Rose's because it revolves around the theme of voice, when speaking is possible, what it costs, and what silence does to a woman over time.

An-mei's mother was silenced by societal pressures. Reduced to a concubine and stripped of her

standing, she ultimately took her own life in a move aimed at converting her death into a source of strength for her daughter. She learns from this history that silence is damaging and that speaking, even at a cost, is crucial for survival. She brings this lesson to America, attempting to pass it on to Rose. However, as Ho notes, the transfer of maternal wisdom is hindered by the cultural divide between what the mothers understand and the language in which the daughters can process it (Ho 115). An-mei's lesson appears as a burden to her daughter not as permission. She perceives her mother's pain as an obligation she can never satisfy rather than a model of resilience.

Abraham and Torok's idea of the 'transgenerational phantom' is also helpful here. They suggest that when a significant loss or shame isn't mourned and addressed within one generation, it passes to the next not as a memory but as a 'gap in the unconscious,' a silence that the next generation inhabits without grasping its form or source (Abraham and Torok 176). Rose lives in this gap. She senses that her mother carries something she cannot see directly. She understands that her mother's expectations stem from a history she hasn't been made aware of. This impacts Rose's ego development, she struggles to separate her feelings from her mother's, can't fully trust her own judgment, and lacks the tools to articulate her experiences.

The communication breakdown between Rose and An-mei is depicted through contrast. An-mei's straightforward, metaphor-rich narrative wisdom contrasts with Rose's indirect and anxious thoughts. Lim's feminist reading highlights how Tan illustrates this difference as a structural argument against dominant American models of self-expression, including therapeutic methods, which fail to capture the full range of women's communication across cultures (Lim 585). The therapist Rose sees is not incorrect but operates within a cultural expectation of self-exploration that does not align with An-mei's storytelling. Rose finds herself caught between two ways of understanding oneself, fluent in neither.

Toward Resolution: Rose Finds Her Voice

The novel's movement toward resolution for Rose is deliberate. It does not promise sweeping transformation. Instead, it offers a moment of ego recovery, an authentic act of self-assertion that shows what once seemed impossible is now achievable. When Ted tells Rose to sign the papers to sell the house, something shifts. She refuses. She asserts her decision to keep the house, expressing what she wants. The shortness of the scene can be misleading. In terms of the psychological journey traced throughout the novel, this moment marks a significant shift in how Rose's ego functions.

What this moment shows, in Freudian terms, is that the ego has regained enough strength to recognize both desire, the insistence of the id on what Rose truly wants and a moral claim, the superego's belief that she deserves it. For the first time in the novel, the id and the superego are briefly aligned. The ego no longer has to manage a conflict between them. It simply needs to act. For someone whose ego has

been defensive for years, this action is truly remarkable.

The conversation with An-mei before this moment serves as the turning point in the story. An-mei talks to Rose not with typical American advice but with her own stories. She shares tales about her mother, what it costs a woman to stay invisible, and the importance of knowing one's worth. These lessons are not new for An-mei; she has carried them throughout the novel. What changes is her daughter's ability to take them in. Huntley sees this scene as the moment when the novel's core theme of "finding one's voice" is fully realized at the character level (Huntley 120). The psychoanalytic perspective explains why Rose can hear what she could not before. Ted's withdrawal has created an ego crisis that has removed the defenses blocking her perception.

It's essential not to romanticize this resolution. Rose's act of self-assertion does not mend her relationship with her mother, does not erase the cultural conflicts she faces, and does not guarantee a future free from psychological struggle. Freud, with his usual realism, stated that the goal of psychoanalytic work is not happiness but transforming "neurotic misery into ordinary unhappiness" (Freud and Brewer 305). Tan's conclusion for Rose reflects this spirit. The ego has found a stable position, at least for now, under certain conditions. While that is not everything, it is still significant, and the novel recognizes this difference.

The Second Generation as Psychoanalytic Subject

Rose's journey is, in one sense, about one woman's psychological growth. But as the novel's broader structure indicates, it's also about a structural condition, the experience of the second-generation immigrant. They inherit the emotional baggage of one world while trying to establish their own identity in another. Akhtar, based on his clinical experience with immigrant patients and their children, argues that immigration represents a "second individuation process" for immigrants, a reworking of the separation-individuation dynamic that usually happens in early childhood (Akhtar 38). For immigrant children, this process is more complicated; they develop their own identities in a care giving environment that is culturally dislocated.

This situation has significant implications for the formation of the superego. The superego that develops in second-generation children is often internally conflicted, containing aspects aligned with two different cultural value systems that do not fully agree. This describes Rose's situation perfectly. Her superego is not simply Chinese or American. It is a hybrid that struggles to meet its own demands because those demands are, in some ways, contradictory. This leads to the ongoing psychological tension illustrated by Rose's indecision and her feeling of never fully belonging anywhere.

Wong interprets the novel through what she calls the "necessity/extravagance" dialectic in Asian

American literature, highlighting the tension between the immigrant's need for survival (necessity) and the second generation's wish for independence (extravagance). What seems extravagant to the immigrant may be seen as essential by the child (Wong 16). The psychoanalytic lens frames this dialectic as a conflict between a superego shaped by survival needs and an id influenced by the promises of a culture of abundance and individuality. The ego caught between these two demands is Rose's ego, and the novel paints a detailed picture of what it feels like to live in this position.

Conclusion

Viewing Rose Hsu Jordan through Freud's model of the mind shows that her passivity is not a flaw but a psychological response, the ego's practical answer to conditions that made active self-assertion feel too risky. The id in her mind craves belonging, love, and the right to live her own life. The superego, influenced by An-mei's voice and the contradictions of the immigrant household, is divided by conflicting demands, often punishing and silent, never fully satisfying. The ego, caught between these two pressures, resorts to passivity and delegation, which works until it catastrophically fails.

The mother-daughter relationship is the novel's deepest psychological theme. Rose's superego is formed through An-mei and it is their conversation that allows for the possibility of ego recovery. However, the distance between them is long and challenging. The novel recognizes that the cultural and generational gap between them cannot be entirely bridged. The insights from Abraham and Torok enhance the Freudian view by explaining why this distance is so tough to cross. The losses that shape An-mei's inner life are passed down to Rose not as stories but as an unconscious atmosphere. Recognizing and working through this atmosphere can be one of the hardest inheritances.

The greater significance of this reading is not merely theoretical. It sheds light on the psychological costs of growing up between worlds. These costs are real and specific and manifest in Rose's struggles with self-assertion, trusting her own judgment, and understanding where her desires end and others' expectations begin. Tan depicts these challenges with seriousness and empathy, while Freudian psychoanalysis offers a way to articulate what she portrays. The combination of careful literary analysis and psychoanalytic theory creates a deeper understanding of a character whose apparent simplicity hides real psychological depth and offers insights that transcend the text to illuminate the broader experiences of the second-generation immigrant.

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