

The Architecture of Silence: Id, Ego and Superego in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Rakhi*

Prof. R.P.Singh¹, Shaiwal Kanaujia²

¹Senior Professor, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow

²Research Scholar, Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow

Abstract

This paper looks at Rakhi, the second-generation protagonist of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams* (2004). It reads her through Freud's model of the psyche: id, ego and superego. It asks how these three parts take shape in a woman raised by an emotionally withholding immigrant mother. Rakhi also grows up in an American world that has no real language for her kind of longing. The paper draws on Freud's ideas about repression and sublimation. It also draws on Sudhir Kakar's work on the Indian family and D. W. Winnicott's idea of the good-enough mother. The central claim is simple: Rakhi's psyche is built around an absence, not a presence. Her mother, Mrs. Gupta, keeps back the stories of India that could have fed her daughter's early curiosity. This withholding becomes the raw material for Rakhi's id, ego and superego. The paper traces how this buried desire comes back as artistic compulsion. It looks at how Rakhi's ego handles marriage and motherhood in ways shaped by Kakar's account of Indian family life, which works differently from Western individualism. It also looks at how her superego only softens after her mother's death, when the dream journals finally answer what silence never would. The paper ends by looking at how the September 11 attacks and Rakhi's bond with her own daughter Jona, carry this inheritance into a third generation.

Keywords: psychoanalysis, diaspora, second-generation identity, sublimation, superego

Introduction

Children of immigrants often carry a particular kind of loneliness. It is a loneliness built out of protection. Rakhi, the narrator of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Queen of Dreams*, grows up inside this exact contradiction. Her mother, Mrs. Gupta, can read other people's dreams. It is almost a supernatural gift. Yet she cannot bring herself to describe her own past to her daughter. She simply refuses to speak of the country she left behind. This refusal becomes the central fact of Rakhi's childhood. Her inner life takes its shape from this refusal. It shapes her more than anything her mother actually does or says.

This paper reads Rakhi's psychological growth through Freud's model of id, ego and superego. Her whole development, this paper argues, is a long negotiation with an absence. Her id does not show up as simple appetite. It shows up as a starved curiosity about India, a curiosity her mother will not feed. Her ego handles the practical demands of American adulthood marriage, motherhood, a small business. All the while, it quietly manages the desire underneath. Her superego does not come from a parental authority she actually felt. It has to be built out of silence and discipline instead. After her mother's death, it is rebuilt again, this time out of the dream journals. Those journals finally say what could never be spoken aloud. Gogol Ganguli, in *The Namesake*, faces a crisis of naming, a crisis of the visible social world. Rakhi's

crisis is different. Hers is inward and psychological. It is tied to what she inherits without ever being told she has inherited it.

Queen of Dreams offers rich material for this kind of reading. The novel does not set out to be psychoanalytic. But Divakaruni pays close attention to maternal withholding, artistic compulsion and quiet domestic compromise. Because of this, Freud's vocabulary maps onto Rakhi with unusual precision. This paper traces that mapping in four steps. First, her id forms in the space of her mother's silence. Second, that id returns as artistic sublimation. Third, her ego labors through marriage and motherhood. Fourth, her superego softens slowly and painfully after Mrs. Gupta's death.

Freud's structural model splits the psyche into three parts. The id holds instinctual desire. It follows the pleasure principle and seeks satisfaction without worrying about consequences. The ego grows out of the id's contact with the outside world. It follows the reality principle. It mediates between instinct and the demands of that outside world. The superego forms through the internalizing of parental and social authority. It acts like a moral court. It judges the ego's choices against an inherited standard. His account of sublimation matters here too. When a direct instinctual aim gets blocked, its energy can go somewhere else. It can move into a socially valued activity, often artistic or intellectual work. The drive itself does not disappear (Freud, *Ego* 30).

This model cannot simply be dropped onto a diasporic subject without some adjustment. Sudhir Kakar's work on the Indian family gives us that adjustment. In the Indian psychic structure, he argues, the ego's task of testing reality does not belong to the individual alone. In the early years, the mother performs this task. Later, "the family-at-large and other social institutions" take over (Kakar 107). A person makes decisions as a member of a group. Self-assertion on one's own plays a smaller role. When immigrant parents carry this structure across the ocean, their children inherit it too. The second generation child grows up with an ego tuned to family and community. This happens even while the child grows up inside a culture that prizes individual choice above almost everything else.

D. W. Winnicott adds another piece with his idea of the "good-enough mother." Psychic health, he says, depends on a mother who actively adapts to her infant's needs. As the child grows, that adaptation should lessen gradually (Winnicott 14). Where this attunement is missing, the child has to build an inner moral world alone. The felt warmth that should go with it simply is not there. Put Freud, Kakar and Winnicott together and a picture emerges. Rakhi's psyche is not purely Freudian. It is not purely cultural either. It is the product of one specific situation, a Bengali immigrant household. In this household, authority is present, but affection is withheld. The child's ego has to do double duty. It negotiates an American social world. It also negotiates an inherited, mostly unspoken, Indian one.

Rakhi's id does not show up as appetite or aggression in any usual sense. It shows up as hunger instead. She hungers for "all things Indian because [her] mother never spoke of the country she'd grown up in-just as she never spoke of her past" (Divakaruni 35). This hunger is instinctual in the Freudian sense. It seeks satisfaction without needing to justify itself. Rakhi wants India the way a child wants a bedtime story. She does not want it because she reasoned her way to needing it. Something in her simply reaches for it.

As a girl, Rakhi resents her mother's careful, well-managed style of motherhood. That same care keeps her "out of the place she wanted most to enter." It denies her what she calls her "birthright" and dooms her instead to "the bland life of suburban America" (Divakaruni 43). Notice something here, the deprivation is not material. Mrs. Gupta is not neglectful in any practical sense. The deprivation is narrative and emotional. Rakhi is denied the stories that would let her locate herself inside a lineage. She says plainly that she would have preferred those stories "to have come from my mother, and to have been set in India,

where she grew up, a land that seemed to me to be shaded with unending mystery.” Instead, her mother insisted she “didn’t know any good stories, and that India wasn’t all that mysterious” (Divakaruni 4). The flatness of that refusal is itself the wound. The novel later reveals that her mother does not withhold out of cruelty. She does it because she does not want to become one of those mothers who splits her child “between here and there, between the life right now and that which can never be.” Rakhi does not know this motive. She simply feels her mother’s inner life as distant, sealed off in a world she cannot enter. Slowly, she comes to believe that India itself holds the key to understanding both her mother and herself. Freud’s account of repression describes exactly what happens next. When an instinctual desire gets blocked again and again, the psyche has a few options. It can respond with anxiety. It can respond with withdrawal. Or the repressed material can return later in a different, disguised form. For Rakhi, the desire goes underground. She eventually stops asking her mother about India altogether. She settles instead on a private verdict, her family is “weird.” It is a flattened, childish label. It stands in for a grief she does not yet have the words to name. A pattern gets set here. An emotional need goes unspoken because direct access to it has been shut off. This pattern becomes the template for much of Rakhi’s adult life. It shows up most clearly in her marriage to Sonny. There, too, emotional needs stay unspoken between two people who share a home but not, entirely, an inner life.

The repressed material does not vanish. It comes back to Rakhi in disguise, first in dreams, and later, devastatingly, in fact. The India her mother refuses to narrate while alive resurfaces symbolically in dream imagery throughout the novel. This is exactly the kind of disguised return of the repressed that Freud describes. Only after Mrs. Gupta’s sudden death in a car accident does Rakhi finally get access to the knowledge she wanted her whole life. She finds it in her mother’s private dream journals. The author renders this access as a kind of flood. She describes how “the dreams her mother had protected her from all these years, positioning herself between her and them like a fortress wall, crash over her” (Divakaruni 108). The image of the fortress wall is worth pausing on. It shows just how much active labor Mrs. Gupta’s silence had required. Her silence was not an absence of feeling. It was a defense, built and maintained on purpose, for years. It collapses after her death. All at once, far too late, it delivers to Rakhi the very thing her childhood id had wanted for decades.

Rakhi’s id could not find its object directly. So it found another route, her painting. As a painter, she is drawn to images that resist realism and logic. These are images that answer to impulse more than to plan. Most of her paintings, we learn, “had been about India, an imagined country researched from photographs” (Divakaruni 10). This detail is striking. It tells us the India in her art is not memory. It is reconstruction. It is built from secondhand images because direct, lived, maternal access to the place was never granted. Art here is not really a professional choice. It is a psychic compulsion. Divakaruni presents it as something closer to necessity than to career.

Julia Kristeva’s account of sublimation helps explain what happens in these scenes. Drives that cannot find direct expression, she argues, discharge themselves into cultural production instead. The resulting work becomes aesthetic and psychically necessary at once (Kristeva 22). Rakhi’s paintings do not try for an accurate, researched reconstruction of India. They try to evoke it symbolically. This is exactly what we would expect from an instinctual connection. She is not painting what she knows. She is painting what she has been kept from knowing. The gap between those two things is where the id speaks.

Rakhi spends her childhood and much of her adult life emotionally restrained in exactly this way. But she does something different with her repression. She does not just endure it. She converts it into expression.

Art becomes a means of survival, especially in the periods of greatest crisis after her mother's death, and during the social upheaval that follows the September 11 attacks.

Trauma weakens the ordinary defensive work of the ego. At these exact moments, Rakhi's repressed material surfaces with the greatest force. Her journey does not pause under this pressure. If anything, the uncertainty seems to help it along. It pushes id and ego into a more active conversation with each other. Through her painting, she gives shape to an unconscious desire that childhood never let her satisfy. Above all, it is a longing for maternal closeness and for a cultural origin she was told, falsely as it turns out, held no mystery at all. Her id resurfaces here as creativity, not disruption. It lets her reclaim fragments of herself. And she does this while still functioning inside an ordinary, demanding, external reality.

The id represents impulse. The ego represents the ongoing work of regulation. Rakhi's ego shows up most clearly in the practical architecture of her adult American life, marriage, motherhood and the chai shop. Divakaruni places her as a Berkeley-based single mother and artist. She runs the chai shop with her best friend Belle. The shop is built on purpose to fuse Indian and American sensibilities under one roof. It works almost as a physical model of the negotiation going on inside her. The shop struggles once a bigger, more commercial cafe opens nearby. Her response is to lean harder into the shop's genuinely Indian character. She does not try to compete on the new cafe's terms. This mirrors a broader pattern in her life she finds stability by leaning into her inheritance, not away from it.

Her marriage to Sonny gives the clearest single example of the ego at work. Rakhi chooses him through a Kakar-inflected version of the reality principle. In this version, social legibility and family stability outweigh emotional intensity. Sonny is dependable, practical, and emotionally even. He is exactly the kind of partner who lets her life hold together within a recognizable social framework. Kakar's description of the South Asian psychic structure explains why this choice is not, within the novel's own logic, a failure of desire. The ego's reality-testing function has historically been "transferred from the mother to the family-at-large and other social institutions" in the Indian psychic model. In this structure, a person evaluates a decision like marriage "as a member of a group rather than on his own" (Kakar 107). Her choice of Sonny does not prove she wants nothing more. It shows an ego conditioned by culture to put belonging first, ahead of private satisfaction. That is a very different thing from having no feeling at all.

And the feeling has not disappeared. Divakaruni takes care to show that the marriage, whatever stability it offers, does not fully answer Rakhi's emotional needs. Sonny likes the world to make sense in ordinary, straightforward ways. She is drawn instead to meanings that lie beneath the surface of everyday reality. The gap between these two temperaments creates real distance between them. At one low point, she tells herself, almost defensively, "I'd be fine alone, I'm tough, I don't need anyone" (Divakaruni 101). The bravado in that line is itself the giveaway. She does not confront the marriage directly. Instead, she redirects her emotional energy outward: into painting, into the chai shop, into the disciplined work of responsible motherhood. This is sublimation exactly as Freud describes it. The ego's most successful handling of an id-driven impulse does not repress that impulse outright. It redirects the impulse toward an activity the culture values (*Ego* 30).

Kakar makes a similar point. He describes the id's "primary process thinking" and the ego's "secondary process thinking" as complementary functions serving "a fundamental human purpose." Both preserve a continuous self across the flux of outer events. The primary processes of "condensation, displacement and symbolization" enrich an inner world. Logic and reasoning alone cannot reach that inner world (Kakar 106). For Rakhi, dreams and art are exactly this inner language. They run alongside the practical negotiations of her outer American life. They do not replace those negotiations.

The formation of Rakhi's superego is, in many ways, the strangest and most affecting part of her psychology. It is built almost entirely out of a moral authority she never felt directly. Mrs. Gupta is disciplined. She is consumed by ethical seriousness and shaped by self-sacrifice. Kakar would recognize all of this as the qualities of a "good mother," defined by tolerance, protectiveness and nurturing (Kakar 108). But Winnicott's standard reminds us that psychic security needs more than these qualities in the abstract. It needs an active, felt adaptation to the child's particular needs. This attunement "gradually lessens" only once the child grows able to tolerate its absence (Winnicott 14). Mrs. Gupta is consumed by her gift and her own discipline. She cannot offer this attunement to her only daughter. The absence of a genuinely "good-enough mother" in Rakhi's early years leaves an imprint that outlasts childhood entirely. She grows into the habit of measuring herself against a moral standard she inherited but was never given an explanation for. This habit shows up again and again in how she handles crisis. She chooses care, continuity and responsibility, again and again, instead of escape. These choices come from an internalized standard, not from any single instruction her mother ever gave.

As Rakhi grows older, this inner moral voice becomes harder to miss. She stays devoted to her daughter Jona. She works to hold her marriage together. She finally works up the will to confront her mother's hidden past. None of this reads like passive obedience. It reads like a form of creative self-reconstruction. Rakhi does not simply follow rules. She builds an identity. Her superego, in other words, is not the punitive, rule-bound structure of classical Freudian theory. It is a moral consciousness formed by absence and kept alive through creativity.

This superego is not rigid. Its softening is one of the most important developments in the novel. Rakhi reads her mother's dream journals. She discovers the vulnerability and pain Mrs. Gupta spent a lifetime concealing. Her inherited moral authority stops feeling like a demand. It starts feeling like something closer to empathy. Her father plays a crucial, underappreciated role in this shift. Her mother's presence had always been ethically demanding. Mr. Gupta offers warmth instead. He builds a bridge between Rakhi and her mother. He shares memories and explains silences that Mrs. Gupta herself never would have explained.

Kakar notes that in the Indian family structure, the mother's role as the child's primary ego mediator eventually gets "transferred outward to the family at large and other social institutions" (Kakar 107). After Mrs. Gupta's death, this task falls specifically to the father. He continues Rakhi's ego and superego development. He becomes the bridge to the wider social world that the maternal bond alone could never provide. He does not replace the mother. He reconstitutes her. He translates a harsh, largely silent inheritance into something Rakhi can actually live with. Classical psychoanalysis often describes a punitive superego. What emerges in Rakhi by the novel's end is something else, a caring, self-regulating moral consciousness. It finally lets her grow weary of carrying her mother's inheritance exactly as it was handed to her. She embraces her own creative and emotional instincts instead. Her superego does not simply suppress the id here. It collaborates with the ego to build something closer to equilibrium. This collaboration is the real psychological arc the novel traces, from its opening pages to its close.

Rakhi's psychic balance is careful but not perfect. It does not survive the September 11 attacks intact. For years, she has channeled her id into painting and into her chai shop. Now it resurfaces in a completely different register. It shows up as uncontrollable anxiety and racial shame. It is an instinctive fear attached to her own visible identity, a brown woman in post-attack America. Her chai shop was once a site of cultural fusion and creative work. Now it becomes a target of anti-South Asian hostility. This outside assault takes apart the very ego-structures she had built her adult life around.

Homi Bhabha's idea of the "third space" helps explain why this collapse feels so total. This is the unstable, contingent zone that diasporic subjects occupy between cultures. Bhabha argues that moments of national crisis can collapse this in-between space entirely. They force subjects back into a rigid binary, belonging, or not belonging (Bhabha 36). For Rakhi, this collapse arrives at exactly the moment her superego has begun to soften, through the dream journals, into something more forgiving. The crisis tests that softened, newly empathetic moral consciousness against a hostile external world. A new kind of political awareness emerges from that test. She comes to understand her mother's decades of silence differently now. It was never simply a personal withholding, a private failure of intimacy. It was a survival strategy, shaped by an America that has never been fully safe for people who look like them. The 9/11 crisis completes a reinterpretation that had already begun. It lets her read her mother's whole withheld life in a more forgiving light.

Divakaruni extends this psychic inheritance one generation further, through Jona, Rakhi's young daughter. Jona's psyche appears remarkably unguarded compared to her mother's. Her mother had to fight its way past a wall of maternal silence. The daughter's id, read through Freud, shows up differently, as an uninhibited acceptance of imagination and intuition. She speaks naturally of her invisible companion Eliana, without a trace of anxiety. She refuses outright the adult distinction between fantasy and reality, a distinction her mother has spent a lifetime negotiating.

This ease is exactly what Rakhi cannot process. Watching her daughter, she confesses that Jona, "who had come out of my body, tiny and crumpled and containable," now has "parts to her life that I can't enter." She adds that it does not matter "whether they're real or imagined. I feel excluded all the same. Like the rest of my family - my mother, my father, Sonny - she too has become an enigma" (Divakaruni 65). This line is remarkable. It shows Rakhi recognizing, almost against her will, that she is repeating her own mother's position. She now stands outside her daughter's inner world exactly as her own mother once stood outside of hers. But this time, the exclusion has nothing to do with withholding. It has everything to do with a child's ordinary, healthy autonomy.

Jona's ego, by contrast, is far better integrated into external reality than her mother's ever was. She shows none of Rakhi's characteristic self-doubt. Belle asks whether Eliana is simply "like an imaginary friend." Jona rejects the category, visibly offended. "Only babies have imaginary friends," she insists. Her friend is real, she says, because "she sings me songs, and tells me stories" (Divakaruni 65). Psychoanalytically, this refusal matters. Jona is not offering the ordinary developmental compromise of the transitional object. She is asserting Eliana's reality. She pushes back against the exact adult category that would file her experience away as normal childhood fantasy.

At first, Jona's superego develops through affection and inherited cultural memory, not through fear. But the novel does show the mechanism of superego-formation switching on directly. It happens in a scene charged with the same dynamic Rakhi experienced as a child, now reversed. Jona claims that Eliana gave her a missing lunchbox. A frightened, exhausted Rakhi snaps back: "Jonaki, there is no Eliana. I want you to tell me who really gave you that lunch box" (Divakaruni 191). In this moment, Rakhi steps into the very position of transmitting authority that Mrs. Gupta once occupied for her.

Jona's whispered reply confirms that the mechanism is already at work. Freud describes the child's superego forming out of fear of losing parental love. Jona says, "It's just like Eliana said. She told me not to talk about her to you. She said you wouldn't believe me and that you'd be mad" (Divakaruni 192). She has internalized her mother's disapproval before that disapproval was even spoken aloud. This is exactly how Freud says the superego anticipates punishment. The novel later reveals Jona to be the inheritor of

her grandmother's gift as a dream interpreter. This suggests something important. Whatever psychic material Mrs. Gupta withheld from Rakhi in life still moves down the family line. It skips around silence instead of being stopped by it.

Read through Freud's model, and corrected by Kakar's account of the Indian family and Winnicott's account of maternal attunement, Rakhi emerges as a distinct kind of character. Her psychology is organized less around ordinary conflict and more around absence. Her id takes shape as a hunger for a mother's stories that never came. Her ego builds a workable American adulthood out of the reality principle, marriage, motherhood, a small business. But this reality principle is inflected by Kakar's model of family-oriented decision-making, not Western individual self-assertion. Her superego forms without the felt warmth Winnicott says a child needs. It hardens first into an inherited discipline. Only later, after her mother's death, does it soften into something closer to empathy. Her father acts as the bridge that makes this softening possible.

What makes her case distinctive, within the broader argument of this paper, is how directly her psychic fate depends on access, not resolution. Divakaruni does not give her protagonist a moment of triumphant integration. Instead, she gives us something slower, a painful, ultimately survivable process of learning to live with contradiction. Instinct, reason, and inherited morality coexist here. None of them finally defeats the others. The September 11 attacks show how fragile this equilibrium remains, even once it has been reached. A hostile external world can shatter it at exactly the moment it seems most secure. And Rakhi's relationship with Jona shows that the psychic material she inherited, however painfully, does not simply end with her. It moves forward, transformed but not erased, into a daughter whose ease with her own inner world says everything. It measures how far Rakhi has traveled and how much distance still separates a wound from its healing. Divakaruni's real achievement, in the end, is this she renders the whole architecture, id, ego and superego alike, not as an abstract diagram, but as the lived, specific texture of one immigrant daughter's ordinary and extraordinary life.

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