

Ego Quest from Impoverishment to Reconciliation in Velina Houston's Japanese American Play *Kokoro (True Heart)*: A Freudian Reading

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Abstract: Japanese Americans' struggle to achieve integration into the American mainstream culture has its powerful impact on their psychological well-being. Socially reserved and family oriented, the Japanese are challenged to cope with the mainstream American individualism and independence. Signs of melancholia, based on Sigmund Freud's theories, are investigated in *Kokoro (True Heart)* (2004) written by the Japanese American playwright Velina Hasu Houston. The Japanese American protagonist, Yasako Yamashita, battles with cultural nonconformity and social remoteness which have provoked an aggressive superego incorporated in her mother's ghost to govern and manipulate her world. The study aims to interrogate how the domineering superego succeeds in exhausting Yasako's stranded ego driving her to commit parent-child suicide "oyako-shinju." Although the suicide attempt has highlighted the problematic cultural gaps within the American society, nevertheless it has pinpointed the importance of resolving Japanese minority cultural differences. Velina Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)* does not only offer an astounding psychological insight into Japanese Americans' battles with a melancholic ego fragmentation and deprivation indicated in symptoms of ambivalence, anxiety, compulsive repetition, sense of guilt and sense of inferiority, but it, also, advances solutions for ego reconciliation and self-conformity.

Keywords: ego impoverishment, Freud, Japanese American, *Kokoro (True Heart)*, melancholia, Velina Hasu Houston

1. Introduction

Japanese Americans have been psychologically contending with identity construction as they straddle two ever-shifting sets of cultures. Japanese American Velina Hasu Houston (1957-) is an internationally celebrated American playwright of a multicultural descent; her father was African-American/Native-American and her mother was Japanese. In *Contemporary Playwrights of Color*, Ostrow (2021) stated that "Houston proudly identifies as a multicultural, multiethnic person" and her "theatrical repertoire is largely inspired by her multicultural identity and Japanese heritage". In *Kokoro (True Heart)* (2004), Houston gives a full delineation of a Japanese wife and mother struggling to get adapted to the mainstream American culture. Yasako Yamashita's strong yearning for Japan, a dearth of affectionate connections with a hostile surrounding and her husband's infidelity have incited her psychological struggle. Yasako's superego representing Japanese traditions appeared in her deceased mother ghost which exercises a domineering

influence over Yasako's world. Although Yasako survived the suicidal attempt, she was imprisoned and faced a harsh trial under the witness of the American society which regarded her as an aggressive murderer. *Kokoro (True Heart)* features the threatening impact of the collision of two dissonant cultures – the instilled Japanese principles and mainstream American culture – as it involves differing innate perceptions of honor, marriage and motherhood. This article aims at featuring the perilous psychological conflict of Japanese Americans strained between discordant sociocultural ideologies. The clash between the deep-rooted Japanese beliefs and the mainstream American culture strikes the established identity of Japanese Americans upsetting their ego integrity and threatening its healthy development. Melancholia has become an alarming facet of multicultural communities struggling with depression, social identification and assimilation. Freud (1856-1939) founded his theory of melancholia on the psychological turmoil resulting from an unsurmountable loss of a loved object especially of an ideal kind. The melancholic ego experiences fracture under a tyrannical super-ego which drives its subject to suicide. Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)* (2011) does not only offer an astounding psychological insight into Japanese Americans' battles with ego fragmentation and deprivation indicated in symptoms of ambivalence, anxiety, compulsive repetition, sense of guilt and sense of inferiority, but it, also, advances solutions for ego reconciliation and self-conformity.

2. The ego in Sigmund Freud's theories

Freud's theories were revolutionary due to the importance he gave to the unconscious where imposed repression generates trauma, pain and aggression. In *Modernist Melancholia: Freud, Conrad and Ford*, Enderwitz (2015:21) states that Freud's "brilliant essay 'Mourning and Melancholia' represents a milestone in the long tradition of writings on melancholia" (p. 21). She explains that Freud provided a "vivid" and "detailed" account of the symptoms of melancholia and his perspective was distinguished for the linkage he made between the "melancholic identification" and "the genesis of ego and ego-ideal" (p. 21). In, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*, Winters (2016:18-19) states that many contemporary authors "trace the idea of melancholy back to Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia," which believes that the object of mourning is attached to ideals "like freedom or equality" (p. 18). Winters states that upon failing to "replace the lost object with a new one," the melancholic subject becomes obliged to "incorporate" it leading to "a conflation between the self and the lost object" (p. 18). He adds that "this internalized loss becomes a recalcitrant wound that 'empties' the self and undermines any notion of self-coherence" (p. 18). Winters states that Butler as well as other contemporary authors have taken melancholy to wider "ethical and political dimensions" defining it as an ever going "engagement" with "remains and leftovers from past experiences of loss" (p. 19). Moreover, Winters refers to Anne Cheng, who has built her thoughts about "racial formation" on Freud's theory of melancholia and used it to highlight "forms of grief" encountered by "racialized groups, especially Asian-Americans" (p. 19). Winters asserts that Cheng has shifted melancholia from subjective to collective

racial struggle giving it a collective cultural form that reflects the modern world torments.

The ego acts as a governor of all mental processes as Freud (1961c:55) states in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*: “[The ego] is entrusted with important functions. By virtue of its relation to the perceptual system it gives mental processes an order in time and submits them to ‘reality-testing’” (p. 55). On the other hand, the super-ego stands for the moral standards utilized by the ego as a tool to measure its own actions. In the introduction to *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, Strachey (1961:10) states that one of the assignments of the super-ego is to act as a standard reference for the ego against which it evaluates its performance. In “Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,” Freud (1933:59-60) asserts that “in each of us there is present in his ego an agency like this which observes and threatens to punish, and which in them has merely become sharply divided from their ego and mistakenly displaced into external reality” (p. 59). Freud affirms that this agency is the “conscience” which is the “super-ego” and it “enjoys a certain degree of autonomy” (p. 60). The super-ego could demonstrate “severity” and “cruelty” which is defined as “melancholia” by Freud (60). Moreover, in *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Butler (1997:167-174) refers to Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” explaining that the melancholic subject “denies the loss of an object (an other or an ideal)” and that the “lost object is magically retained as part of one’s psychic life” (p. 167). Butler adds that the “social world appears to be eclipsed in melancholy, and an internal world structures in ambivalence emerges as the consequence” (p. 167). Butler argues that “ambivalence may be a characteristic feature of every love attachment that a particular ego makes” (pp. 173-174). She asserts that “Freud offers this psychic articulation of ambivalence [...] as an account of the formation of the super-ego in its critical relation to the ego” (p. 174). Melancholia is incited when the surrounding sociocultural norms engage in opposition with ancestral cultural values creating ambivalence which overburdens the ego in creating a coherent psyche. Fidelity towards the ideal country of origin is combated by its rejection as the ego fails to navigate reality that enforces varied principles. The ego is drained of energy which surfaces as anxiety and compulsive repetition and its consequential failure is indicated in sense of guilt and inferiority.

Ambivalence results from the failure of the ego to substitute for the lost object in its struggling attempts to release it from consciousness. Butler (1997:174-187) states that “that the loss of an object precipitates an ambivalence toward it as part of the process of letting it go” (p. 174). Melancholia is “defined as the ambivalent reaction to loss” and it emerges from the withdrawal of the object-loss from consciousness (p. 174). This object is absorbed in the ego in the form of a “remnant” and, thus, altering the ego by identification which leads to the splitting of the ego to “critical agency” and “the ego as object of criticism and judgement” (p. 180). Internal ambivalence arises as the melancholic subject starts berating him/herself and rehabilitating the other (pp. 182-183). The melancholic subject falls into a

vicious cycle of psychic conflict; he declares “his own worthlessness, identifies the loss at the sight of the ego and, hence continues to fail to identify the loss” (p. 186). Ambivalence escalates as “self-beratement takes the place of abandonment, and becomes the token of its refusal” (p. 186). A heightened conscience “brings aggression against the object” and “self-debasement” adds to ego deprivation compelling the death drive to appear (pp. 186-187).

Anxiety and compulsive repetition are signs that indicate the ego’s inability to bring conformity to the psyche when overwhelmed with a demanding super-ego and discriminating reality. In *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, Freud (1961c:78) describes the ego as “a poor creature” restrained by commanding forces or dangers and he defines anxiety as “the expression of a retreat from danger” (p. 56). Freud asserts, “If the ego is obliged to admit its weakness, it breaks out in anxiety—realistic anxiety regarding the external world [and] moral anxiety regarding the super-ego” (p. 78). The melancholic subject rejects the loss of an object by resorting to remembrance or repetition of former occurrences as a form of resistance. In “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” Freud (1950:145-157) asserts that “the patient yields to the compulsion to repeat” and “the greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering” (p. 151). Moreover, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1961a:14) affirms that “the patient’s resistance arises from his ego, and we [...] perceive that the compulsion to repeat must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed” (p. 14). Madsen (2008:65) explains in “On Subjectivity and Survivance” that melancholia, according to Freud, is “pathological” and it “involves the loss of ego” (p. 65). Madsen further adds that “melancholia involves compulsive repetition of an absent because of traumatic past moment” and “the melancholic subject is split in multiple directions between the past and present, caught in nostalgic longing, and trapped in denial” (p. 65).

A sense of guilt interconnected with a sense of inferiority rises out of ambivalent conflicting internal and external conceptions. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1961b:84-89) states, “The tension between the harsh super-ego and the ego [...] is called [...] the sense of guilt; it expresses itself as a need of punishment” (p. 84). Freud asserts that “a stricter and more vigilant conscience is precisely the hallmark of a moral man” (p. 87). He adds that the tension of the sense of guilt is generated because the “threatened external unhappiness — loss of love and punishment on the part of the external authority — has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness” (p. 89). Moreover, Freud (1961b:51) argues in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works* that both sense of guilt and sense of inferiority are conjoined in melancholia as “the ego ideal displays particular severity and often rages against the ego in a cruel fashion” (p. 51). In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1961a:14) states that “loss of love and failure leave behind a permanent injury to self-regard” which “contributes more than anything to the ‘sense of inferiority’” (p. 14). Thereupon, Freud (1922:1-7), in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, states that “Individual Psychology”

is inseparable from “Social or Group Psychology” (p. 7). Freud asserts that the individual psyche is determined by the surrounding social contexts, therefore, individual and social psychology are considered one. Freud states that “in the individual’s mental life someone is invariably involved” and, therefore, “Individual Psychology is at the same time Social Psychology as well” (pp. 1-2). Freud adds that “Group Psychology is, therefore, concerned with the individual man as a member of a race, of a nation, [...] or as a component part of a crowd of people who have been organized into a group at some particular time for some definite purpose” (p. 3). Consequently, the well-being of the ego is interdependent with sociocultural contexts which is highly challenging in multicultural environments.

3. Ego fragmentation in Velina Houston’s *Kokoro (True Heart)*

Kokoro (True Heart) is a play written by Houston who takes the reader on a journey in the tormented disturbed psyche of the Japanese American Yasako Yamashita who is charged of murdering her daughter. While in the eyes of the American culture, Yasako is a brutal criminal killing her own child, Japanese culture believes that parent-child suicide, “oyako-shinju,” is an act of preserving the unity of the mother and her child in the after world. Yasako is struggling with depression and alienation as she is unable to conform with American mainstream culture. From the beginning of the play there is a clear manifestation of a troubled psyche as Yasako’s domineering super-ego has driven her weakened ego to fragmentation transforming it to an object. Freud (1933:58) explains in “Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychological Personality” how the melancholic ego can “take itself as an object,” “observe” and “criticize itself” (p. 58). Psychological fragmentation is established as a theme by Houston when Yasako “removes a silky American flag from her kimono sleeve and billows it about her” (Prologue, 2014:77). The splitting of Yasako’s ego is evident in its attempts to rationalize its sense of identity when she emerged on stage enfolded with the Japanese sense of self while the American identity springs as a mere offshoot. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:129) states that melancholia is initiated when the super-ego is “spilt off from the ego” and it might “demonstrate its independence” (p. 129).

4. Melancholia

Melancholia is a psychological condition which results from a fractured malfunctioning ego. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:125) explains that melancholia is “a pathological disposition” which is triggered by “the loss of a loved person” or “the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as fatherland, liberty, an ideal, and so on” (p. 125). Yasako Yamashita is agonized over the loss of her connection with her homeland, Japan, and feeling isolated from mainstream American society. In *Empathetic Imagination: Performing Interracial Intimacy in Contemporary Women’s Drama*, Na (2016:74-75), states that “Yasako’s isolation and the absence of an empathetic community” springs from “a seemingly irreconcilable culture-inflected emotional gap” (p. 74). The adversarial remote surrounding has empowered her mother’s ghost and intensified Yasako’s grieving over her country. Na asserts that “it is the ghost of

Fuyo that serves as an imaginary sympathizer for Yasako as ‘the one person who can understand’ in the absence of community” (p. 75). The play commences with a strong presence of nature signified in the ocean that connects Yasako with Japan picturing herself as a “root” that has been plucked from its natural Japanese habitat and transplanted in a foreign hostile land. Yasako expresses her grief and yearning for Japan: “I am a root in this soil. I grow best here, all blossoms, all fruits, always. But one day, the gardener comes and I am transplanted. The winds, the rain, the gnawing forces of erosion transform the blossoms, scattering them into the river of time” (Prologue, 2014:77). The deeply-rooted history of Japan empowers the super-ego in its battle against a fragile ego eroded with real life afflictions.

Fragmented and detached from the ego, the super-ego gains autonomy and projects itself to reality as a separate entity. Yasako’s mother appears as a ghost that starts subjugating Yasako’s ego to her commands. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:129-131) explains that melancholia surfaces when the superego is severed as an independent split part of the ego: “We see how in [the melancholic] one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and [...] looks upon it as an object” (p. 129). Freud argues that the superego, called “conscience” shows “dissatisfaction with the self on moral grounds” and it “can become diseased independently” (p. 129). *Kokoro (True Heart)* is permeated with voices reflecting psychic hallucinations: “FUYO enters. A spirit, the back of her kimono trails behind her in shredded strands. Her face is snowy white; her hair is wild, long, grey streaked” (Prologue, 2014:77). Fuyo’s dark apparition descends on Yasako claiming possession of her ego. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud affirms that “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, so that the latter could henceforth be criticized by a special mental faculty like [...] the forsaken object” (p. 131). Since the super-ego is a shattered piece of the ego, traits of fragmentation appear in Fuyo’s “shredded strands” of kimono and “streaked” hair.

With the escalation of tension, Fuyo and Yasako become vicious contenders. Yasako’s ego incessantly struggles to suppress the haunting super-ego; she starts her talk with the dismissal of Fuyo; “Good-bye, Mother” (Prologue, 2014:77). The conflict is initiated when the controllable Fuyo sternly “shakes her head” refusing to falter, “beckons” and “encircles” Yasako. She plays on Yasako’s conscience stressing the importance of their Japanese cultural roots which are threatened to get clutched and drift with the mainstream American culture. The words Fuyo sings in Japanese: “*Se o hayami iwa ni sekaruru*” reflect the voice of an inner danger signified in “a boulder” obstructing the flow of Japanese streams in their beings: “Our lives like the river’s foam split asunder by boulders” (Prologue, 2014:77). In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:131) asserts that the ego is “altered by the identification” when an object-loss become transformed into an ego-loss (p. 131). The ideal-loss represented in Japan has led to an ego-loss which keeps exhausting Yasako’s psyche with dents and contradictions. Melancholia is triggered by clashing cultures indicated in a superego representing Japanese deep-rooted beliefs and an ego urged to find reconciliation with American norms. Ambivalence weakens the ego causing symptoms as anxiety and compulsive disorder to invade

the psyche pushing it to the verge of break down evident in a tormenting sense of guilt and a demeaning sense of inferiority.

4.1 Ambivalence

The melancholic ego is spurred by cultural ambivalence marked in the contradictions between Yasako's inherent Japanese entity and the proximal forces signified in characters of Kuniko and Hiro. Fuyo forewarns Yasako of the torrential American sociocultural system threatening the existence of her established heritage. Cultural ambivalence is evident in the struggle between Fuyo's harsh demands to adhere to Japanese principles and Kuniko's melodic voice urging Yasako to flow with American mainstream. Kuniko's inclination to American culture is expressed in her wishes to "have friends sleep over like all the American kids" and she does not bow or keep distance like Japanese, but "hugs like people in American movie." Yasako's household is dominated by hostility towards Japanese culture; Hiro, head of the patriarchal Japanese family, believes in American discretion and individualism. Hiro argues that Yasako should "stop carrying" her daughter and "it isn't right [...] to sleep with Kuniko, especially as she gets older." He does not approve of having his feet washed by his wife who should have her own dignified presence, he believes that Fuyo (Japan mother country) is merely "ashes and dust" including "Bon Festival" and "kimono" and he breaks with the Japanese principle of honor by having a secretive affair with Shizuko. Elshaib (2019:14-17) in "Japanese-American Theatre: Confucianism and Nationalism," states that Hiro, "rejects the Japanese cultural heritage and traditions which Yasako admire, such as bowing, observing Bn Festival, wearing yukata (kimono), making home-made o-manju, washing her husband's feet, and drinking green tea" (p. 17).

The suicidal act of oyako-shinju which culminates the ego melancholic struggle stands for the immense cultural difference between two disparate cultures. While in the collectivist Japanese culture, it consolidates mother and child in one coherent unit, American sociocultural norms conceive it as a violent crime against human rights of autonomy and individualism. Elshaib states that the play "investigates the clash of cultures on the levels of marriage, family, and honor" (p. 14). She asserts how Houston expresses "the Japanese point of view that the mother is powerfully connected to her children" as it is "immoral" of a mother to commit suicide and leave them "childless" which is "culturally and logically difficult [for Americans] to understand" (p. 14). Cultural ambivalence is reflected on the melancholic conflicted feelings which feed the psychological turmoil of a fragmented ego. The mainstream American culture generates a lot of reality stimuli causing the ambivalence of Yasako's identity. Yasako surprised her lawyer, Angela, of how she thinks of herself as a tree. Yasako's confusion about her identity is marked with ambivalence and a deadlock in the ego is detected; "the women stare at each other over a confounding impasse". Yasako pauses striving to perceive her identity: "... and I am still the tree" (1.6.115). The super-ego is the barrier that obstructs self-identification and projects ambivalence towards Yasako's sense of identity. Fuyo has impeded and strained Yasako's relationship with her husband and her adjustment to reality in America. All of Hiro's attempts in helping Yasako

construct a cultural identity in America were met with failure under the pressure employed by Fuyo who has continuously thrown obstacles into the path of Yasako's ego rendering conformity an unattainable mission. Evelyn, an assimilated Japanese American, explains that Yasako's mother was the reason of her inability to get adapted to American culture; "She was raised by a woman who grew up before the war. That means old customs, old fashioned ways" (1.6.119). Consequently, ambivalence fueled by the super-ego, keeps the melancholic anxiety and ego disintegration in process.

Ambivalence is one characteristic of melancholia which indicates the contradiction between life and death reflected in the incorporation of an object-choice as a substitute of object-loss. Yasako's ego is toiling to compensate the loss of Japan with the ingestion of Kuniko, her daughter, who has no physical existence on the stage; her presence is merely "marked by wind chimes or the tinkling of bells" (1.1.78-79). The act of incorporating Kuniko into Yasako's ego is strongly evident in Yasako's words; "If I were a Kangaroo, I would ride you in my pocket forever" (1.1.80). In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1957:131) asserts that the ingestion of an object into the ego is a mechanism of replacing the loss of a love-object as it "develops from a preliminary stage of identification, the way in which the ego first adopts an object and the ambivalence in which this is expressed" (p. 131). He asserts that "severe forms of melancholia" is indicated when the "ego wishes to incorporate this object into itself [...] in a "cannibalistic" manner (p. 131). Ambivalence is evident in how Yasako feels torn between leaving Kuniko to survive the grievous life in America as she pleads Fuyo to free Kuniko from the obligation of traveling to the other world through drowning in the ocean; "What if Kuniko stayed here?" (1.5.107). On the other hand, she feels compelled to include her in the suicide attempt as an affirmation of their unity after death.

Ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards the love-object, Yasako's husband, is a marked feature of melancholia. In "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud (1957:132) elaborates on the contradictory feelings associated with melancholia: "The occasions giving rise to melancholia [...] include all those situations of being wounded, hurt, neglected, out of favor, or disappointed, which can import opposite feelings of love and hate into the relationship or reinforce an already existing ambivalence" (p. 132). Yasako fulfills her obligations towards her husband according to Japanese culture; she carries her duties as a housewife including regular feet wash and she waits up for Hiro when he returns home late from work. On the other side, Yasako's husband represents American mainstream culture which she cannot tolerate. Yasako reminds Hiro of the Japanese principles: "Don't you remember? Honor is what we flush down the toilet" (1.3.103). Yasako's psyche is stormed by inconsistent feelings towards her husband; a total abruption of feelings is demonstrated when Yasako revolted in anger against her husband's secretive relationship with Shizuko and she firmly demanded her right to live in honor. She "stares at Hiro intensely" with bold persistence to fire Shizuko and as soon as he consents to her demands, she directly "gets the basin of water, sits beside him" to wash his feet (1.3.104). Ambivalence was incited when "honor", a fundamental Japanese principle, was caught amidst conflicting cultural disputes.

Ambivalence marking Yasako's melancholia is reflected in the external tumultuous world dominated with incompatible cultural standards. According to Freud, internal ambivalence extends to include humanity at large. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud (1961b:96) asserts that "civilization is a necessary course of development from the family to humanity as a whole" and it is interrelated to "the inborn conflict arising from ambivalence" (p. 96). Moreover, Usui (2000:193), in "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)*", states that Houston "plays a role as counselor between two cultures and two countries and guides us to the most profound side of human psychology" (p. 193). In a review of *Kokoro (True Heart)*, Shimpo in the play review explains that the play deals with "a multicultural illumination on the age-old struggle between an immigrant's native culture and the expectations of American society". Minorities' internal struggle is interconnected with sociocultural strife of an American multiracial community which overpowers the vulnerable ego with anxiety.

4.2 Anxiety

In the play, tension has been built up by the severity of a super-ego, a harsh discriminatory reality and the traumatic loss of the love object. Hiro signifies the one affectionate link that holds Yasako to her home country and compensates her ego for the hostile proximal and social contexts. The protective shield of Yasako's consciousness detaining suppressed ambivalent grievances is fractured by the traumatic disclosure of her husband's infidelity, and it gets flooded with countless stimuli leading to the outburst of melancholia. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1961b:85) explains that feelings of helplessness are interconnected with dependence on other people which is "designated as fear of loss of love" (p. 85). He states that if a person "loses the love of another person upon whom he is dependent, he also ceases to be protected from a variety of dangers" (p. 85). Upon the discovery of her husband's infidelity, Yasako gets engulfed in loneliness and becomes vulnerable to external harsh stimuli enfeebling her ego. Moreover, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud (1961a:23-24) states that traumatic "excitations from outside" are "powerful enough to break through the protective shield" and "there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus" (pp. 23-24).

The ego withdraws the energy used for repression and releases it as unpleasure which is called anxiety. Freud (1936:18-23) states, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, that inhibition "characterizes states of depression, including the gravest form of them, melancholia". Freud defines inhibitions as "restrictions of the functions of the ego which have either been imposed as a measure of precaution or brought about as a result of an impoverishment of energy" (pp. 18-19). Consequently, scarcity of energy leads to the deterioration of ego performance and eventually to its malfunction. Events in *Kokoro (True Heart)* follow the road map dictated by Fuyo which is an indication of Yasako's ego impairment. Yasako's ego is exhausted with the heavy burdens of Japanese culture imposed by Fuyo which she carries "like a dead weight" (1.2.96). Freud in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and*

Anxiety, believes that “the ego is the actual seat of anxiety” (p. 23). Freud (1936:100), states that “anxiety arose originally as a reaction to a state of danger, and it is reproduced whenever a state of that kind recurs” (p. 100). Anxiety abides at the heart of Yasako’s psychical problems; anxiety is incessantly emitted with hopeless attempts of repressing the voice of conscience and the dangers of the external hostile world. Yasako has been overcome with anxiety and tension permeated her surrounding: “Fuyo moves urgently through the house as if exorcising evil, the tension she feels demonstrated in the taut pulling and wringing of her kimono sleeves and the wiping away of her own tears, her hands an inch away from her face” (1.2.95). Inhibitions coerced on the energy consumed ego are interlinked to suppressed unconscious giving rise to compulsive repetition.

4.3 Compulsive repetition

Compulsive repetition is initiated by the ego as a form of resistance to the repressed unconscious. Freud (1961a: 14), in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, states that “the patient’s resistance arises from his ego, and we then at once perceive that the compulsion to repeat must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed” (p. 14). Freud proceeds explaining that the compulsion to repeat absorbs the ego in a vicious circle of anxiety escalation: “It is clear that the greater part of what is re-experienced under the compulsion to repeat must cause the ego unpleasure, since it brings to light activities of repressed instinctual impulses” (p. 14). Moreover, the desperate attempts of Yasako’s ego to suppress the domineering superego have given rise to compulsive repetition which the melancholic subject is not aware of its presence. In the introduction to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Zilboorg (1961:xiv) defines “compulsive repetition” as “the repetitiveness of certain patterns of human behavior and the inevitability or, [...] the inescapable nature of this repetitiveness” (p. xiv). Zilboorg asserts that “compulsive repetition is something that the individual is not conscious of” (p. xiv). Through her persistent visits to the beach, Yasako repeatedly relives the moment when she departed Japan which indicates a compulsive repetition disorder. Moreover, Yasako creates poetry teeming with images of Japan in a compulsive mode: “The sea is ... the sea is a bridge of light, leading back into the warmth of honor, away from its scant reflections in this life, the mere images of honor, those masks of paint and clay” (1.3.101). The sea is Yasako’s savior as it will take her to the warm Japanese lands where honor is regained, and it will rescue her from the artificial masks and false reflections of America. The compulsion to repeat all the details of Yasako’s painful experiences of adjusting to a foreign culture has fueled her anxiety. However, Yasako is not aware of the act of repeating her daily actions by writing them down as she “merely stares at [Shizuko]” (1.2.97).

Yasako’s journal is employed to repeat the painful traumatic moment she experienced upon knowing her husband’s secret affair. Shizuko, her husband’s mistress, “picks up YASAKO’S journal, leafs through it” and she asks Yasako; “Do you write down everything you do?” and adds; “Good idea. Too bad we can’t control our men in the same way” (1.2.97). Yasako’s ego is endeavoring to regain control of the psyche through compulsive repetition. In “Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Houston’s *Kokoro*

(*True Heart*), Usui (2000:192) states that “Yasako’s manic depressive illness caused by her long-term unresolved and unarticulated negative emotions of depression, sorrow, and anger is inscribed [in her] letters” (p. 192). This act of compulsive repetition is initiated by the ego as a form of resistance to the repressed anxiety, rage and depression in the unconscious. Christensen and Meinert (2016: 86), in *Taming Time, Timing Death: Social Technologies and Ritual*, interlink the melancholic agitation to compulsive repetition which is described as “an uncanny urge to go on repeating painful memories” in order to “master the agonizing forces of loss” (p. 86). Compulsive repetition has drained Yasako’s ego of energy and incited the death drive. Christensen and Meinert explain that Freud considers “repetition” as “a self-destructive reaction” and the melancholic “instead of accepting the ‘call of reality,’ which blocks the otherwise infinite and boundless repetition of sad memories,” he starts relating to the “lost love object” (p. 86). Consequently, connecting with reality is the key to stop the destructive ego consuming compulsive repetition. Anxiety preys on compulsive repetition which yields to a vicious cycle of melancholia surging to an agonizing sense of guilt.

4.4 Sense of guilt

A high sense of guilt marks the culmination of melancholia in *Kokoro (True Heart)* and aggravates ego depletion. The outbreak of melancholia was foreshadowed by Yasako’s appearance as “a powder keg” screaming out every letter of her Japanese name. Yasako’s first outburst was at school when a student abused her daughter, and she furiously expressed her anger to the teacher; “He would not take his hands off Kuniko’s face? And you did not scold this . . . this bully” (1.2.100). In *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works.*, Freud (1961c:37) explains the meaning of the sense of guilt: “The tension between the demands of the conscience and the actual performances of the ego is experienced as a sense of guilt” (p. 37). The demands of Yasako’s mother and the failure of the ego to fulfill Japanese norms, have been reflected in a strong sense of guilt. In “Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychological Personality,” Freud (1933:61) elaborated on the sense of guilt stating that “the super-ego applies the strictest moral standard to the helpless ego which is at its mercy; in general it represents the claims of morality, and we realize all at once that our moral sense of guilt is the expression of the tension between the ego and the super-ego” (p. 61).

Yasako lost interest in the external world and lived a confined life within her house tortured with self-reproaches and low self-regard. Freud (1961b: 53), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works.*, asserts that the super-ego is manifested as a sense of guilt or criticism and it “develops such extraordinary harshness and severity towards the ego” (p. 53). He explains that in melancholia “the excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold upon consciousness rages against the ego with merciless violence” (p. 53). In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:125) enlists among a number of melancholic traits “a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterances in self-

reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (p. 125). Yasako harshly blames herself in her imprisonment: “I failed as a wife. And now I have failed as a mother, too” (1.6.118). In “Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,” Freud (1933:60) states that “during a melancholic attack, [the] super-ego becomes over-severe, abuses the poor ego, humiliates it and ill-treats it, threatens it with the direst punishments, reproaches it for actions had been taken lightly at the time” (p. 60).

Violent self-accusations give an indication of a struggling melancholic subject. Yasako keeps blaming herself of failures that should not fall on her shoulders; her husband is the one to be blamed for them because of his infidelity. She tells Hiro; “I’m sorry. I should be helping you at the restaurant instead of worrying about Japan” (1.1.84). Moreover, she severely blames herself for Kuniko’s injury when she fell from the monkey bar; “I was not watching her closely enough” (1.3.101). While Yasako is blaming herself for insufficient presence with her daughter, it is her husband who is to be blamed for his prolonged absence. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:127-130) states that that the melancholic “represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any effort and morally despicable” (p. 127). Freud asserts that the melancholic’s “self-accusations” are “hardly at all applicable to the patient” and they apply more to “some person whom the patient loves” (130). The sense of guilt is interconnected with crime as it sparks self-inflicted pain. Freud (1961c: 49), in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, asserts that the sense of guilt “refuses to give up the punishment of suffering” (p. 49). Freud (1961b: 52) states that “an increase in [...] sense of guilt can turn people into criminals” as “it was a relief to be able to fasten this unconscious sense of guilt on to something real and immediate” (p. 52). Dishonor has fueled Yasako’s sense of guilt to implement self-inflicted punishment by committing “oyako-shinju.” Heinrich (2018:136), in *Race and Role: The Mixed-Race Asian Experience in American Drama*, states that the only “honorable choice” for Yasako was to commit “oyako-shinju” which “is meant to release the entire family of shame” (p. 136). The torturous sense of guilt is associated with a sense of inferiority intensified with social intolerance towards minorities.

4.5 Sense of inferiority

The sense of guilt is closely interrelated to a sense of inferiority which is a prominent feature of melancholia. Freud (1933: 65-66) states, in “Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychical Personality” that a “major part of the sense of inferiority derives from the ego’s relation to its super-ego; like the sense of guilt it is an expression of the tension between them. Altogether, it is hard to separate the sense of inferiority and the sense of guilt” (pp. 65-66). Freud (1933:78) adds that “the strict super-ego [...] lays down definite standards” for the ego conduct which, if violated, the super-ego “punishes it with tense feelings of inferiority and of guilt” (p. 78). In melancholia, the conflict between the ego and the super-ego yields to sharp deprivation which is reflected in the sense of inferiority. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:127) affirms that in melancholia it is not the world that

becomes “poor and empty;” it is “the ego itself” (p. 127). Yasako’s sense of inferiority and helplessness are expressed in her sad expressions of how her daughter looked at her as a defenseless parent: “Mommy, in Japan could you be Super-Mom?” (1, 2. 100). Furthermore, Yasako feels worthless to herself, family and society; the ego reduced the subject to a mere tree and Yasako questions “without self-pity” if anyone “cares about the tree” or “needs” it (1. 6. 114). In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud (1957:127) asserts that “the melancholic displays [...] an extraordinary fall in his self-esteem, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (127). Yasako’s sense of inferiority is highlighted when she insists to wash Hiro’s feet even with cold water: “The water may be cold. But I will wash your feet” (1.3.104). Hiro, an assimilated Japanese American, got offended by Yasako’s disgraceful demeanor; “Don’t be so ridiculous! Can’t you see how ridiculous you are?” (1.3.104).

Yasako struggles with social inferiority in her interaction with a harsh external reality which has exhausted the ego in extensive battles. In Yasako’s unconscious, her repressed desires to go back to Japan are enlivened with every act of social discrimination she is confronted with in daily life. She had to wait in line with Kuniko who had a broken arm, and she was denied buying a book for her daughter. For Yasako, Americans are strangers who do not understand her words or feelings: “But how can you make her wait here with all these strangers when she is in pain? (takes the papers) Don’t you understand?” (1.2.99). Her frustration reflects her melancholic state of mind. Usui (2000:181), in “Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Houston’s *Kokoro* (*True Heart*), states that Yasako has “difficulty of communicating in English due to her frustration with Americans’ common inability to understand or tolerate foreign accents” (p. 181). Usui adds: “In spite of her struggle against displacement, Yasako’s endeavors result in frustration, oppression, disappointment, the loss of self-confidence, and even her child’ loss of respect for her” (p. 181). Yasako’s internal suffering is fed by external social injustices which escalated her melancholic state.

Besides the internal agitation, the ego battles the external dangers of reality which add to its tension and anxiety. Freud (1933:78) asserts, in “Lecture XXXI: The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,” that the ego “confined by the super-ego, repulsed by reality, struggles to master its economic task of bringing about harmony among the forces” (p. 78). The discharge of anxiety, “unpleasure,” is interrelated with external danger that resides in reality. Yasako’s husband, a harsh representation of reality, confronts her with the absence of Fuyo who is weaved by Yasako’s delusional mind: “Your mother’s not here. She’s ashes and dust” (1. 1. 82). The super-ego in Yasako revolts against reality putting the ego in a difficult position; “FUYO stamps her foot toward HIRO to protest this remark” (1.1.82). The confrontation between reality and super-ego indicates the clash between the mainstream American culture and the Japanese-rooted beliefs and traditions. As reality clashes with super-ego, tension elevates and the strength of the ego is weakened depriving the psyche of accordance. Drained with internal and external struggles, Yasako’s ego is increasingly impoverished with melancholia. The harsh

super-ego seized the opportunity that Yasako's ego was ruptured, and it exercised its powers driving Yasako to commit "oyako-shinju." Freud (1961c:53) states, in *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925): The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, that "the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego" (p. 53). He adds that the death instinct starts "holding sway in the super-ego" and "a pure culture of the death instinct [...] often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death" (p. 53). Yasako's ego received the last blow ending the chaotic turmoil of a disturbed psyche by taking the decision of committing suicide and involving Kuniko in the process. Fuyo's spirit stood urging her to follow her instincts and turn her back on America; "Yasako turns towards her home only to face FUYO's gaze" (1.4.106). By withdrawing from her life in America and embracing death, Yasako shows melancholic signs of losing interest in the world, a profound depression and a powerful obsessional death drive that overcomes worldly feelings of love and compassion.

5. Ego reconciliation

Yasako had to make her decision to surrender to death or conquer the repressive authoritarian super-ego and thus afterwards finds her true self. Yasako describes herself as being trapped between two worlds; "But the web of the net / detains me as the worlds overlap / and I consider the trap. / whether to die to live / or live in death," (1.6.125). In "Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: *Oyako-Shinju* (Parent-Child Suicide) in Houston's *Kokoro (True Heart)*, Usui (2000:189) affirms that Yasako's ego regained its powers during imprisonment as she was able to "embrace a recovered positive attitude toward life" (p. 189). Usui asserts that the "compassionate and determined support enables Yasako to regain her sense of dignity and self-confidence" as "Yasako's gradually healed self overcomes the haunted sea occupied by Fuyo's and Kuniko's spirits" (189). Yasako's ego has been delivered from the repressing super-ego and adopted a positive view of life, and a reconciled self is realized. Freud (1961b:56) states in *Civilization and its Discontents* that "people make themselves independent of their object's acquiescence by displacing what they mainly value from being loved on to loving; they protect themselves against the loss of the object by directing their love, not to single objects but to all men alike" (p. 56). A harmonious psyche is realized through establishing processes of communication with reality.

Human communication, active navigation through cultural differences and compassionate tolerance of the "other" are the true measures of eliminating psychological sufferings of American minorities. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1961b:26) explains that human beings are confronted with varied menaces: "We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body; [...] which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally from our relations to other men" (p. 26). Freud asserts that "the suffering which comes from this last source is perhaps more painful to us than any other" (p. 26). Yasako is confronted with an inner

psychological dissonance, an external world with intolerant systems and daily clashes with her husband, neighbours, fellow Japanese immigrants and American society at large. As Angela started comforting Yasako, anxiety is gradually released and “Yasako’s tear grow fervent.” Angela endeavors to forge a bridge of cultural communication between Yasako’s instilled Japanese traditions and the American sociocultural norms: “I’ll use cultural defense to make our case” (1.6.115). She, also, urges Yasako to conform by getting familiar with the American life. She asks Yasako to sweeten the American black tea if it is “so bitter” for her: “So sweeten it. Is that so difficult?” (1.6.116). Meanwhile, after regretting his detachment from his family and sympathizing with his wife, Hiro started exerting a lot of effort to save his wife by gaining the support of the community through having over five thousand names on the petitions. Moreover, Usui, in “Creating a Feminist Transnational Drama: Oyako-Shinju (Parent-Child Suicide) in Houston’s *Kokoro (True Heart)*,” states that “Evelyn constructs a bridge between Yasako, Hiro, and Angela in order to establish a foundation for emancipating Yasako from her imprisoned self” (p. 186). In *Empathetic Imagination: Performing Interracial Intimacy in Contemporary Women’s Drama*, Na (2016:78), states that “the play drags Yasako out of an isolated space into the sphere of collective intimacy among women” and she was able to “make transition from the past into the future” through conceiving “new forms of intimacy and happiness [...] strictly defined by the American value of individualism” (p. 78). It is only through Yasako’s trial that dialogue between Japanese and American culture is initiated resolving her ego melancholic sufferings.

The plot of *Kokoro (True Heart)*, structured on the protagonist’s struggle in navigating two cultures, is reflected in Houston’s employment of double theatrical conventions. Heinrich (2018:101-103), in *Race and Role: The Mixed-Race Asian Experience in American Drama*, states that Houston’s plays “dramatize mixedness not only in the content and embodiment of characters but also in the theatrical form of her work” as she moves away from the hostile singular racial American society to “her own spaces where Japanese and American cultures seamlessly coexisted” (101-102). Houston “created theater that fuses different theatrical traditions” through “blending” Western realism and Japanese Noh drama (p. 103). In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Noh theatre is defined as “traditional Japanese theatrical form” which is more related to “talent” or “skill” and its performers are rather “representers” than actors who “use their visual appearances and their movements to suggest the essence of their tale rather than to enact it.” Moreover, it is stated that one of the types of Noh plays is the “kyojo mono” which means “madwoman play” in which the “protagonist becomes insane through the loss of a lover or child.” Heinrich (2018:129-134), in *Race and Role: The Mixed-Race Asian Experience in American Drama*, stresses that Houston’s utilization of the “two different theatrical forms” is best communicated in the complex act of oyako-shinju as she combines the “theatrical elements of Japanese Noh in a text grounded in Western psychological realism” (pp. 129-130). Through Yasako Yamashita, who functions as the principal character in the Noh play, Houston “can examine the dichotomy between presence and absence and the real and the unreal in the drama” (p. 130).

Henrich emphasizes that Noh theatrical convention is “an ideal medium” which “investigates a myriad of dichotomies” invoking “elements that appear contradictory into a unified world” (p. 131). Yasako Yamashita alternates between the fictional world of an apparitional Japanese mother and the realistic world of estranged hostile America. Similarly, the unseen child embodies the “absence-presence” of Noh theatrical conventions as Henrich asserts that Yasako’s daughter is “physically absent as the role is not portrayed by an actor onstage but only indicated by lights, sound, and in the mother’s reactions in performance” (p. 134). Henrich adds that “the theatrical conventions employed in the place of the child’s body onstage foreground Yasako’s unwillingness to see the American influence already present in home and in her life” and allows Yasako to “tread between the phantasmal and actual realms of Noh drama” (p. 134).

6. Conclusion

This article offers a psychoanalytical insight to Houston’s *Kokoro (True Heart)* based on Freud’s theory of melancholia. Being a Japanese American, the protagonist struggles with ego fragmentation which is prompted by identity confusion. Yasako’s identity is interconnected with her husband and daughter and this is contradictory to American individualism. Moreover, Yasako is torn between Japanese traditional respect for humility and obedience and the American belief in independence and autonomy. The persistent demands of Yasako’s superego to comply to ancestral traditions that value honor, respect and sacredness towards ancestors have weakened her ego. Furthermore, Yasako’s inability to find a compromise between her instilled Japanese beliefs and American mainstream standards has rendered the gap between her superego and reality unsurmountable and the consequences life threatening. As melancholia seized Yasako’s psyche, ambivalence started overshadowing her world and all her surrounding lost clear definition. Ambivalence in the external world where discord of cultures takes place has accentuated Yasako’s internal conflict where feelings of love/hate, presence/absence and life/death become an indication of a disintegrated ego. Compulsive repetition and a severe sense of guilt and inferiority defeated Yasako’s enfeebled ego due to its dual emanation from both the severe judging of the internal conscience and the demeaning intolerant external American reality. Conformity to the American mainstream requires understanding of cultural differences from all society members to ensure a positive ego development of American minorities.

The ego of the Japanese American character is undermined with confinement when interconnections become limited to household members only. Feelings of rejection and exclusion by her husband, fellow Japanese Americans and American community have barred Yasako’s connectedness with reality and enforced the isolation status on her. Once Yasako began stretching her network to include others from society, the protective shield of her ego gained reinforcement, dents in her injured psyche were sutured and her ego retrieved its performance. Asian Americans should open communication channels with their social surroundings and promote a sense of eagerness to connect and adjust to the reality. Interaction contexts in which Yasako was involved had a great impact on her psychological

well-being. The drive behind civilization is a healthy ego development that regulates, coordinates and energizes the human for achievement.

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