



## **Insecure Attachment of a Transracial Adoptee in Inconvenient Daughter (2021) by Lauren J. Sharkey**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the experience and causes of insecure attachment in a transracial adoptee that is depicted in Lauren J. Sharkey novel, *Inconvenient Daughter* (2021). This study aims to analyze the causes of insecure attachment such as the loss of homeland and identity confusion related to navigating dual cultural identities of her birth culture and adoptive culture, and how insecure attachment is experienced by a child for being a transracial adoptee and consequently it affects the child mental state and interpersonal relationship because of the child difficult past, and how the child progress through her life from her younger years and advance until her adult years with her experiencing various insecure attachment styles. This study is based on John Bowlby's Attachment Theory and a psychoanalytic lens. Using a qualitative method by analyzing textual elements like narration, dialogue, and character interactions, the study aims to demonstrate the profound long term impact of early attachment issues on the emotional health and relational patterns of transracial adoptees. This study concludes that transracial adoption profoundly affects emotional development and identity formation. The absence of cultural connection and consistent parental affection leads to the emergence of insecure attachment patterns that continue into adulthood, emphasizing the long-term psychological effects of adoption, cultural loss, and the search for belonging.

**Key words:** Insecure, Attachment, Adoption, Transracial

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

Family is the most important part of every individual life as it will shape our personality and how we act. Parents have the main role in the family as the ones who guide, protect and educate their children. If that is not met, the family dynamic would fall apart. With the role of loving and caring parents, the family becomes a comfortable and warm place to grow and develop and the opposite holds true.

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The term parent in parent-child relationship is defined by Khaleque et al., (2011) as any person who has a more or less long term care giving responsibility for a child. This person may be a biological or adoptive parent, sibling, grand parent, other relatives or even non-kin. According to Pianta et al (2003) define relationships as a pattern of interactions, expectations, beliefs and effects organized at a level more abstract than observable behaviors.

Linares et al. (2006) discussed that biological parents and adoptive parents represent two distinct parenting styles, each characterized by varying dynamics and challenges. Such perceptions stem from broader societal attitudes towards biological parents. Moreover, Walkner & Rueter, (2014) suggested that the experiences of biological parents influence their interactions with their children across various developmental stages, including the potential for higher rates of stress and mental health issues. Both biological and adoptive parents significantly influence a child mentality, with adoptive parents potentially exerting an even greater impact, with being an adoptive parent, the parent-child dynamic will be affected. Many adoptive parents worry that revealing the child background could create feelings of insecurity or anxiety regarding their identity (Crouch et al., 2014).

Adoption can significantly impact the emotional regulation of individuals, particularly concerning repressed emotions. Children who are adopted may experience emotional challenges stemming from their early life experiences, which can lead to difficulties in emotional expression and the ability to regulate emotions. For instance, Paine et al., (2021) emphasized how early adverse experiences can predict enduring emotional problems, highlighting that those adopted have an increased vulnerability to such issues compared to their non-adopted counterparts. These adverse experiences often lead to difficulties in regulating emotions and expressing them appropriately. Moreover, there is a phenomenon of transracial adoption particularly in the context of increasing international adoptions where the children are frequently adopted by white families.

A transracial adoptee refers to an individual who has been adopted by parents of a different racial or ethnic background than their own. This generally covers children that have been adopted by families where the adoptive parents belong to a different racial group. Transracial adoptees navigate through their complex identity by their unique experiences of cultural heritage and familial dynamics. As transracial adoptees form their own identities, they often grapple with the influence of their multiple birth culture and the culture of their adoptive families, which can result in a multifaceted process of developing their identity. Transracial adoptees frequently experience difficulties in developing a coherent ethnic identity due to their immersion in predominantly different cultural environments and the lack of racial-ethnic socialization within their adoptive homes (Ferrari et al., 2015).

A real world example of transracial adoption is Angelina Jolie, an American actress, is known not only for her film career but also for her advocacy work with refugees and her commitment to adoption and multicultural family life where she has 6 children, 3 adopted and 3 biological. The first of the adopted children is

named Maddox Chivan Jolie-Pitt and he is from Cambodia. The second adopted child is Zahara Marley Jolie-Pitt and she is from Ethiopia. And the third child is Pax Thien Jolie-Pitt and he is from Vietnam. Angelina Jolie has worked to ensure her children stay connected to their cultural roots visiting their birth countries, encouraging them to learn about their histories, and maintaining their native languages when possible. She has also been open about the challenges of transracial and international adoption, highlighting how important it is to honor a child cultural identity rather than erase or replace it.

According to Bowlby (1980), attachment describes how early relationships with caregivers shape our emotional bonds and relationships throughout life. Bowlby found that attachment was characterized by clear behavioral and motivation patterns. When children are frightened, they seek proximity from their primary caregiver in order to receive both comfort and care. This is on how the parents are sensitive to the child needs. Individuals with insecure attachment often face difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. For example, Wrobel et al. point out that attachment insecurity correlates with an inclination to avoid intimacy and leads to superficial relationships and frequent relationship issues, which contribute to a perceived lack of social support (Wrobel et al., 2022).

The representation of feelings of separation, abandonment and adapting to a new environment are prevalent in literary works. The novel illustrates the main character coming of age story where it is focused on Rowan psychological development with how her past shapes her current perception and behavior. Rowan unstable relationship with her adoptive mother and her struggles with feelings of abandonment and identity, resonates with concepts from attachment theory from Rowan past experience. The novel can be considered as a coming of age story where the novel tells the story of Rowan by following through her life starting from when she is a child and into an adult. Rowan feels like she is different as she is of a Korean descent while her adoptive parents are White. Because of this, Rowan starts to crave acceptance and wants a sense of belonging.

## **B. RESEARCH METHOD**

In this research, the data source is taken from the novel *Inconvenient Daughter* (2020) as the research object. The data consist of textual elements such as narration, dialogues, character interactions, and plot events that reflect the issues from the psychology of the main character with herself and how it reflects her present action that stemmed from her past experiences. These are identified and interpreted through the lens of Sigmund Freud Psychoanalysis Theory and John Bowlby Attachment Theory.

## **C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. Research Finding**

The discussion is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the types of attachment that affected the main character psychological well-being. The second part then examines the experiences and the impact of attachment issues of the main character relationships with other people.

## 4.1 Attachment Styles

There are several styles of attachment in *Inconvenient Daughter*. Attachment is classified into several styles based on its characteristics and context, each of which has a different impact on the individual. Rowan experiences with attachment affect her psychological conditions as well as her relationships. In this context, attachment styles such as anxious and avoidant attachment styles are the styles that often appear and have a significant influence on the dynamics and social relationships of the characters.

### 4.1.1 Anxious Attachment

With Rowan background of being a transracial adoptee, she is always being commented on by people around her. This created a dissonance with her sense of identity where she could not be comfortable with herself and develop anxious attachment. This style of attachment is prevalent during Rowan younger years when she was a child. Rowan starts to get into the habit of overthinking and being anxious where she keeps imagining things that are not there in the context of Rowan thinking that she does not belong to her family. This can be seen in the quotation below.

"I followed his finger and noticed Mom was still at the front of the classroom talking to Patty and Mrs. Matthei. "That's my mommy." "Why don't you look like your mommy?" "I don't know," I said honestly. "My mommy says I'm special." "My brother is 'special.' He can't go to school with normal kids 'cause he's retarded. Are you a retard?" "No!" I did not know what a retard was. "She's adopted," the girl next to me explained. "My mom said your real mommy is in China but she didn't want you, so she gave you to a lady in America who can't make babies." "Gross," the boy said, pushing his chair away from the table. "That's worse than cooties!" (p.2, pg.10)

From the quotation above, it can be inferred that Rowan sense of identity is being questioned and is being defined and labeled by other people. This develop Rowan anxiety as she is exhibiting the feelings of worry, fear, or unease. Because she is being negatively perceived, Rowan thinks that it is shameful to be adopted. This creates an internalized sense of rejection or being unwanted and leads her to being anxious. Rowan tried to cling to her belief by believing her mother with the quote "*I don't know*," I said honestly. "*My mommy says I'm special*." where it is later disregarded by her classmates which fueled Rowan anxiety and confusion about her family and herself with how the term "Special" was used in a negative way with Rowan hearing that word as something positive within her understanding, while the classmate uses it as something unpleasant to say to her. By this, the term "Special" can mean 2 things if said with different intentions. It can be used as affirmation towards someone and it can be used as belittling.

### 4.1.2 Avoidant Attachment

For those who lean towards avoidant attachment value autonomy and self-sufficiency more than close emotional relationships with the objective to save oneself against pain or disappointments. They would rather repress their emotions

and stay far from others and be emotionally distant. Rowan exhibits frequent avoidant attachment during her teenage years as she transitioned into a young adult. This is caused if the caregiver were emotionally distant or uncaring.

Then I remembered why I left—I hated the rules, the chores, the way she loved Aidan more than me. But mostly, I hated Mom. I hated how she blamed me, how she looked at me. (p.2, pg.136)

From the quotation, Rowan resents her mother for her unequal love and how she rejects him by loving Aidan more and shows that Rowan to some extent pushes away her adoptive mom by hating her, where avoidant attachment comes to show with how Rowan is repressing anger which is causing problems like relationship difficulties and pushing away other people. This belief is reinforced by her own thoughts where she keeps internalizing blame and shame to the family by being an outsider. This is Rowan's way of escaping the pain of feeling unloved and blamed by being angry with her mother to have planted the inadequacy with the comparison with Aidan.

#### **4.1.3 Disorganized Attachment**

Disorganized attachment often develops in situations where the child's caregiver is both a source of comfort and a source of fear. This results in an inconsistent behaviour of needing positive or acting out negative reinforcements throughout her younger years and is ubiquitous in Rowan adult years. This can be seen in the quotation below,

I didn't know she felt like she had to be hard on me, to be strong for me—that she refused to let herself fall apart until she put me back together. I also didn't understand that she was hurt, and took my actions personally, as if, somehow, the only way she knew how to show me love was by refusing me her tenderness. (p.3, pg.136)

From the quotation above reflects that Rowan was filled with mixed feelings where Rowan conveys disorganized attachment with her mother's unpredictable behavior. With how her mother kept perceiving her actions as rebellious, it all stemmed from confusion and longing for acceptance. As a result, love was shown through discipline instead of affection, reinforcing Rowan feelings of emotional neglect. The mother alternates between control and love. Rowan, in turn, learns that affection comes with tension and distance shaping her later struggles with intimacy.

#### **4.1.1.1 Effects of Insecure Attachment Styles**

##### **a. Anxiety**

People with insecure attachment often experience fear of rejection, abandonment, or loss of closeness in relationships. This anxiety arises as a result of inconsistent or unavailable caregiving early in life. Anxious individuals are more likely to interpret neutral or ambiguous social interactions as threatening, often perceiving rejection or criticism even when none is present and keeps blowing things out of proportion. This can be seen in the quotation below

I hadn't thought about Mom in a while. Hunter had me call Verizon to get her number blocked, and set it up so I couldn't receive calls from private or blocked numbers. It was the first time I realized I missed my mother. "No," I said, trying not to cry, "she buys hers." "Bleh," Jackie said, sticking her tongue out. "Please tell me she doesn't buy Ragu or Prego." She laughed. "No," I half laughed. "She gets her sauce from this Italian place by our house, Ceriello's. They have all sorts of meat and cheeses and stuff there." "Oh, well, you'll have to bring me some the next time you go home!" "Definitely," I lied, wiping a few tears away. "Aww, baby," she said, setting down the tomatoes and putting her arms around me. "What's wrong?" "Nothing. I just haven't talked to my mom in a while, is all." "Well, why don't you call her?" Jackie suggested, walking over to grab her cordless. "No, no. I'm okay." "You know, Rowan, Hunter told me about your mom." "Yeah?" "I get it. Mothers are not easy. But you know, whatever it is you two are fighting about, I'm sure she'd love to just talk to you and see how you're doing." "I know," I said. "I'm just not ready yet." "Okay, well, the phone is here whenever you are." (p.1, pg.124)

This quotation shows Rowan avoidance as a sign of anxiety where she avoids contact because facing her mother evokes emotional distress, guilt, and fear of confrontation as it is a way to manage her anxiety by suppressing triggers rather than resolving the underlying emotional tension. Rowan inability to express or act on these feelings reflects on how her anxiety traps her between desire for closeness and fear of pain or rejection.

#### **b. Difficulties in Emotional Regulation**

Because insecurely attached individuals did not learn stable emotional soothing strategies, they struggle to manage or control their emotions effectively. Rowan difficulty on regulating her emotions can be seen in the quotation below

If I'd known what was to come, I'd have taken the time to memorize the house. To take in its smell, its shape, its essence, so its memory could comfort me when I felt most unsafe. If I'd truly known the man I was running to, I'd have woken Mom. I'd have fallen to my knees and begged for her help, her forgiveness, her love. If I'd known no amount of therapy would stop the nightmares, I'd have turned around and gone back to bed. But I didn't. Outside, I continued to tiptoe since my parents always slept with the windows open. Once I passed the house on Elderberry, I broke into a run and couldn't help but smile. I was in love, and I was free. (p.4, pg.118)

From the quotation reflects Rowan's impulsive behavior and emotional suppression with how Rowan's decision to run away from home despite later regretting it shows how her emotions often overpower her reasoning. Her actions are guided by intense feelings of love, rebellion,

and the desire for freedom, rather than careful thought. This reflects a difficulty regulating emotions, where immediate emotional impulses such as escaping pain or seeking love override her ability to assess consequences. Rowan suppresses her emotions until they build up and erupt into impulsive behavior. She can only process her feelings after the fact, showing that she struggles to identify and manage emotions in the moment where her emotional dysregulation emotions are felt too intensely or too late, leading to cycles of regret and shame.

### c. Altered Perception of Relationships

Insecure attachment can distort how a person views others by seeing others as unreliable (avoidant) or overly important (anxious). This changes how they form and maintain relationships. Rowan perception of relationships can be seen in the quotation below

"Honestly, I'm surprised you're here at all." "What's that supposed to mean?" "Rowan, I haven't seen you in, like, three weeks. I don't think you've slept here since Thanksgiving." "What are you talking about? I just saw you at the Cavs game." "Dude, we haven't had a home game in a month. You said you were going to come to the Villanova game but you fucking bailed . . . as usual." "I told you I wasn't feeling well. Jesus, so I missed one game. (p.4, pg.115)

From the quotation reveals Rowan distorted sense of closeness where she believes the relationship is intact and normal, while the other person feels neglected and distant which suggests Rowan misjudges emotional availability and intimacy, a common outcome of insecure or disorganized attachment, where one struggles to read or maintain closeness accurately. From the quote "*Jesus, so I missed one game*" indicates a tendency to downplay emotional distance or avoid confrontation.

## 4.2 Impacts of Insecure Attachment of a Transracial Adoptee

### 4.2.1 Loss of Homeland

This is a displacement where they can feel threatened and be at a loss from having lost the sense of self and identity, as it disconnects them from the culture and environment that helped shape who they are. This applies to Rowan where she is in a White environment with a White family while she is of an Asian descendant. This can be seen from the quotation below,

I didn't know what it meant to be Asian, but it seemed everyone else did. They expected me to know karate, be good at math, and be able to use chopsticks, but I could do none of these things. As I moved through grade school, the novelty of my having slanted eyes and a permanent tan seemed to wear off. (p.2, pg.10)

From the quotation above shows Rowan early struggle with racial identity, belonging, and internalized otherness as a transracial adoptee. Beneath her simple observations is a deep sense of confusion and alienation that shapes her

developing sense of self. “*I didn’t know what it meant to be Asian*” reflects her lack of cultural grounding. She is ethnically Asian but raised in a white family and environment that offered no connection to her heritage. This leaves her feeling disconnected from both cultures: not fully belonging to the Asian identity others assign to her, nor fitting comfortably into the white world she grown up in. The expectations that she should “know karate,” “be good at math,” or “use chopsticks” show how others reduce her identity to racial stereotypes.

#### 4.2.2 Identity Confusion

Because Rowan does not know where she belongs to, Rowan feels like she does not belong anywhere because she is not adequate enough to be qualified as either a White which is based on her behaviour or being Asian where she does not have enough knowledge about the culture. When Rowan meets other Asians, she feels at a loss as she does not know what they mean. This can be seen in the quotation below,

Travis seemed happy to know another person who was adopted, who understood what it meant to grow up in a neighborhood where no one looks like you, who wanted to know about where we came from. But I wasn't really that person. He spoke of his plans to apply for a passport on his eighteenth birthday—to travel to Korea and find his mother . . . his real mother (p.5, pg.94)

From the quotation above, it can be inferred that Rowan emotional distance from her adoptive and cultural identity, as well as her internal conflict about belonging, origin, and self-acceptance. Through her reaction to Travis enthusiasm about reconnecting with his roots, she feels strange about it. Travis finds comfort in shared experience, but Rowan immediately distances herself emotionally. This suggests she feels alienated even within communities meant to understand her she cannot fully relate, perhaps because she has repressed her adoption-related pain. It implies that she yearns for connection but doesn’t know how to accept it without feeling vulnerable.

## 2. Discussion

The novel *Inconvenient Daughter* by Lauren J. Sharkey represent identity confusion for being a transracial adoptee, which can exhibit various forms of insecure attachment that stems from racial alienation, emotional misunderstanding, and lack of cultural connection significantly influence emotional development and self discovery. Living with bicultural background, with vastly different environment, it’s difficult to know how to integrate both culture. Moreover, there is already a social stigma for being a adopted that is seen as being unwanted and regarded as damaged that has been implanted by murmurs of children. Not only that, identity is the biggest obstacle as it is difficult to form a cohesive self identity.

The transracial adoptee have a difficult time to adjust with all the microaggression that comes from being a different race and copes by pushing people away by anger while at the same time craving affection. This results in the

transracial adoptee to be marked with emotional withdrawal, rebellion and difficulty forming healthy relationships. Furthermore, the denial of cultural roots and emotional disconnection from adoptive family and biological family results in feeling alienated and unable to feel any belonging. The insecure attachment and cultural displacement reveals lasting psychological impact of adoption and identity loss.

#### **D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Based on the analysis of *Inconvenient Daughter* (2021) by Lauren J. Sharkey by using John Bowlby Attachment Theory and through psychoanalytic lens, it can be concluded that Rowan psychological struggles stem from her insecure attachment patterns, which developed due to her transracial adoption and the emotional disconnect within her adoptive family. Her experiences of racial alienation, identity confusion, and emotional misunderstanding contribute to the formation of anxious, avoidant, and disorganized attachment styles. With anxious attachment, Rowan constantly seeks approval and fears rejection due to early experiences of feeling “different”. Next, there is avoidant attachment, Feeling unloved and unfairly treated by her adoptive mother, Rowan represses her emotions and distances herself emotional with her attempts at independence to avoid further emotional pain. Finally, disorganized attachment, Rowan experiences a confusing mix of seeking love and pushing it away. Her mother inconsistent expressions of affection, created a push and pull dynamic that shapes Rowan later relationships with her inconsistencies of affections and indifference.

Moreover, there are causes of insecure attachment. First, there is loss of homeland. Rowan transracial adoption isolates her from her cultural roots, causing a loss of identity and feelings of not belonging to either her Asian or White environment. This leads Rowan to reject her racial identity and reinforces her insecurities. Second is identity confusion, where Rowan is not able to define herself. She denies her Asian identity, internalizes feelings of abandonment, and is unable to differentiate between genuine love and pain, showing deep emotional wounds from her adoption experience.

In conclusion, *Inconvenient Daughter* reveals how transracial adoption can significantly affect an individual emotional development and sense of self. The absence of cultural connection and consistent emotional support contributes to the development of insecure attachments, highlighting the long lasting psychological impact of adoption, identity loss, and the pursuit of belonging. Rowan experiences demonstrate how transracial adoption can profoundly affect emotional regulation, identity formation, and attachment development that persist into adulthood.

This study has revealed that transracial adoption profoundly shapes the emotional development, identity formation, and attachment styles of adoptees. However, more can still be explored in this field to deepen the understanding of insecure attachment among transracial adoptees. By comparing multiple narratives or real life case studies of transracial adoptees. This could help identify recurring attachment patterns and provide broader insight into how cultural identity influences emotional regulation and self discovery. Future research can build upon

this work to foster more inclusive, culturally informed adoption practices so there are no more stigma regarding adoptions.



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