

The Other Dilemma in *Everything I Never Told You*

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Abstract

Everything I Never Told You tells a story about the crisis faced by an American transracial family. Focusing on the death of second daughter Lydia, the novel discusses social problems from the aspects of race, gender, and intergenerational conflicts. This paper analyzes the predicament of the other identity caused by race and gender from the perspective of post-colonialism, explores the real causes of the family crisis, and interprets the efforts made by family members to resolve conflicts. Meanwhile, this paper attempts to take Lydia's tragedy as a warning to reduce misunderstanding and disharmony in family and social communication under multicultural background.

Keywords

Everything I Never Told You; Post-colonialism; The Other; Identity Predicament.

1. Introduction

Everything I Never Told You is the first work of Chinese American writer Celeste Ng, which was published in 2014. Once it was published, it was widely discussed. The novel revolves around a Interracial family: Chinese professor James Li was born and raised in the United States with his parents by using their neighbor identities. He married Marilyn, a white girl with a dream of being a doctor, and had three children. This family lived happily together. However, this harmony was broken by the sudden disappearance of her second daughter Lydia, whose suicide was reported by the police. In the process of seeking the truth, the secrets about this family are gradually revealed. The open-minded family finally understood that their deformed love had become the real reason for their daughter's death, but Lydia could not express her love to the family anymore.

Behind the harmonious family exists all kinds of contradictions caused by race and gender in the United States from the 1970s to the 1980s. The transracial family living in small towns in the United States has become the "other", and its identity different from that of ordinary people has brought trouble and pain to the families. In this family, everyone is confused about their identity. They are aphasic at the social and family level. The father James is the representative of the children of the second generation of American immigrants. He lives with Chinese parents and grows up in American society. He is in a state of cultural and psychological dispersion, facing the confusion of mixed cultural identity. In the patriarchal society, the mother Marilyn longed to achieve her social value as a woman, but her mother's hope and her husband's obstruction after marriage confined her to the family. The three children are not only having difficulty integrating into the collection because of their cross-cultural identity but are also exhausted because of their parents' heavy love. The atmosphere of love masks the fact that parents and children neglect each other. Until the death of Lydia sounded the alarm, everyone's introspection and reflection began. Many factors constitute the "other" predicament of Lydia's family in *Everything I Never Told You*, which leads to a family crisis.

Post-colonial criticism often uses the concepts of heterogeneity, silence, and marginality to analyze the multiple oppression of the "other". Edward Said put forward "the Orient is imagined" in his masterpiece *Orientalism*. From the perspective of Western Centralism, the West represents all positive features, while the East is the "other" subordinate to the West, and

is the discourse constructed under the imagination of the West. Based on Said's theory, Gayatri C. Spivak further discussed the colonial discourse, supplemented the limitations of western feminism from the female standpoint, and warned against the neglect and substitution of the discourse of "subordinate". She also stressed the importance of listening to the voice of the aphasic women of the third world, who are "subordinate" under the dual oppression of empire and patriarchy. Homi Bhabha put forward the theory of "hybridity", and believed that the post-colonial culture formed a "hybridity" under the dual pressure of colonial forces and resistance forces, which was intended to excavate the contradictions between the two colonial parties, disintegrate the opposition relationship and achieve the purpose of deconstructing the authority of colonial culture. [1] From the perspective of post-colonialism, this thesis will take Lydia's family as an example to discuss how different nationalities should build communication bridges so as not to lead to the same tragedy as Lydia.

2. The Other Dilemma: Casting the Inner Wall

From Plato to Hegel, many philosophers have been looking for the relationship between the subject and the object. With people believing that rational thinking can grasp the laws of nature, the object becomes the other outside self. In a philosophical sense, everyone and everything except the self can be understood as other. Lacan explored the formation of the other based on the experience of psychoanalysis, and put forward the "Mirror Theory": babies observe themselves and others through a mirror, then imagine and process in their minds, and know their appearance, thus generating self-awareness." The image of a person's body is the root of every kind of unity he perceives in the object." [2] Self-formation is established by the imaginary relationship, and the other is another end of the imaginary relationship, representing different aspects of the self. Because the other in the imaginary relationship is full of mystery and unknowability, the ego will unconsciously integrate and assimilate the other, which reasonably explains the behavior of using violence to rule and domesticate the other in different cultures under western centralism. The concept of the other is widely used in post-colonialism, which originated from post-structuralism and Foucault's theory of power discourse. When entering a civilized society, discourse becomes a tool of power and constantly shapes people's consciousness. Identity is no longer a simple one-way identification but is mixed with negative alienation, and gradually becomes the other in the process of alienation. The other identity shared by a family in *Everything I Never Told You* is not only derived from James' Chinese identity but also an important reason that each family member is mixed with his resistance in the process of accepting cultural shaping.

2.1. James' Dilemma

James' parents, with the belief of becoming a model Chinese American, came to this free land in the era of being constrained by the Chinese Exclusion Act and tried to create a better life for their families with their labor, but hard work could not exchange for the same identity. In the 1960s, Asians living in the United States were labeled as model minorities by society, because they were able to get rid of the unfavorable factors brought about by the growth environment and gain a place in a foreign country through their unrelenting efforts. On the surface, this label is painted with the word example, but in fact, it is a continuation of long-standing discrimination and prejudice. Even though they are Models, they still cannot be treated equally. They have imposed higher requirements in all aspects of life. It has an immeasurable influence on daily life and psychology. This is why James, who was born and raised in the United States, is actively escaping from the plight of others. On the other hand, it is also passively avoiding problems. James was lucky. He had the opportunity to receive free education in Iowa. The knowledge he learned became the capital for his future survival. But James is also unfortunate. The different vision in society and school has made him ashamed and uneasy for 12 years. This is a kind of

torment. It makes young James know the difference between him and his white classmates. Under the different vision, he refuses to accept his Chinese identity. But the more he wants to integrate into the group, the more he cares about his other identity. Even if he became a university professor across the class, American thinking, and rich knowledge could not completely change his identity as an Oriental. On the contrary, he could not use his knowledge to speak for himself and his family, and could not bravely open his mouth of self-expression, becoming a model minority in line with the imagination of mainstream American groups.

2.2. Marilyn's Dilemma

James' wife, Marilyn, was born and raised in a loving environment. But she has been pursuing something different in life. She has always looked at women with different eyes, and she did not want to be a woman confined in the family like her mother, Mrs. Walker. In high school, she proposed changing the domestic economics class into a manual class but was "considered radical" [5] (p28). To live a different life from her mother, she decided to become a doctor, because this is her "most imaginable career to distance herself from mother" [5] (p31). She will become an independent woman, independent of men, just like the neighbor Dr. Woolf she met later. But "She met a man." (p31), and this man changed her life. Her mother's prediction came true. All her resistance to the fate of women becoming housewives ended when she met James. They got married, raised lovely children, and she became a housewife like her mother. Marrying Asian Americans with different faces made her unique, but it was strange. She was no longer the unrestrained Marilyn, and she was also kidnapped by the James-centered family while taking care of the "happy" family life. Their family is a total freak in the town. "They never go out to socialize or entertain at home. They have no bridge friends, hunting friends or friends they met at the luncheon" (p59). They have no real friends and live alone in the town. Without social life and social integration, this "strange" lifestyle has also had an impact on their children.

2.3. Identity Formed by Anxiety

Babies continue to imitate others and become independent individuals in the mirror image, while James simulates mainstream culture in a different cultural environment to make his true identity struggle with the acquired culture, but his paradoxical American identity is still excluded by the mainstream. Marilyn, who is bullied into fighting against patriarchal production and wants to realize her life value, also compromises on life and takes the initiative to become the other in the same camp as James. Their children were coerced by their parents and the environment and chose a path that could not be theirs: Ness, Lydia, and Hannah became the others in the community and campus because of the oriental color on their faces and worried about their identity. Ness and Hannah were stopped at the grocery store and asked where they came from. They were mocked for the behavior of "pulling the outer corner of the eye outward with the tip of their fingers" [5] (p3). After school, Lydia always "boarded the school bus alone" (p16) and sat quietly with Ness. She never participated in the gossip of her classmates and "never really had friends" (p17). When Ness's swimming team won, he never "got into the winner's car" like others (p86) to share the joy, so he had to go home alone. Ness was teased by other children and refused to play with them during his father's carefully planned father-son swimming class. His father not only did not stand up to defend him but also did not give him mental comfort. "Chinese people can't find China" [5] (p 91) This joke became his heart. From then on, Ness felt that they had never really integrated into the community, Lydia tried to hide the fact that she had no friends, while Hannah played her own "invisible game" at home.

Alan de Botton mentioned in "The Anxiety of Identity" that other people's attention to themselves is very important because "human beings have an inherent uncertainty in their judgment of their value", and their understanding of themselves depends to a large extent on others' views of themselves. [6] In the growing period, teenagers are more easily influenced by other people's views. James, Marilyn, and the children were hurt by other people's opinions

from an early age, blurring their identity in the cracks of culture, and becoming lonely "other" in society, family, and school.

3. Abnormal Communication: Causing Family Tragedies

The colonial discourse subtly changes the colonized, and at the same time, it is changed by the invisible resistance in the process of colonization, so the culture that the colonists want to spread will lose its purity. In this process, only by constantly repeating the cultural symbols as the carrier, can the power of colonial rule be further strengthened.

3.1. Communication under Racism and Patriarchy

When James took the initiative to accept an American concept different from that taught by his parents, he could not completely forget his oriental identity, even though he was constantly stripping away the original oriental culture. The combination of his external image and his internal anxiety prevented him from integrating into American culture. He believed that all his misfortunes are caused by identity, so he asks his children to make friends and integrate into the group to get rid of this dilemma. Ethnic minorities have lost the opportunity to express themselves in such silent discrimination. They can only express their inner voice through the next generation and pin their hope on the next generation. Both James' parents and James are imprisoned by this idea, and James remains this until and after he became a parent. He repeatedly put forward that the requirement for children was the constant reappearance of colonial cultural symbols in James' heart, representing his inner self-confidence and anxiety. The patriarchal ideology and colonial culture have great similarities. Under the repeated regulations on women, the patriarchal system has strengthened the restriction on women. Although as a white woman, Marilyn, whose family is composed of oriental faces, has also become the object of discrimination in the social environment, oppressed by her husband's patriarchal ideology, and has become a marginal person in double layers: James' obstruction and real life have hindered her dream, so she has to return to mediocrity.

After forming a family with James, Marilyn was afraid of her mother asking about her future", because "she didn't know how to answer" [5] (p48), she took the initiative to put down her dream and let the lifelong career of marriage and family become a job temporarily. She has not only become a marginal member of the family who has almost lost her autonomy, but also a marginal member of the society whose mother does not understand because of the reasons of the cross-racial family, bearing the double discrimination in the sense of gender and race. This kind of family life lasted for eight years. Marilyn felt that she should get out of her comfort zone. She confided her desire for work to James and asked James' colleague Tom to work as an assistant at the Christmas party. But James did not understand all this. Her husband was afraid that others would judge him as "not earning enough - his wife had to go out for work" [5] (p78), and asked her to "never think about going out for work" (p78). Even James, who received higher education from Harvard University, is hard to get rid of the bondage of masculinity. For him, the white wife is not only his close assistant to integrate into American society, but also his wife's help to promote his masculinity. He never listened patiently to his wife's demands. He completely forgot that Marilyn was also an independent person with a college education. In a numbing and depressing environment, it seemed that he was the only one responsible for the family. He was the core of this family. Marilyn has had a natural awakening since she was young. She doesn't want to live with others or be trapped in the cage of her family. She didn't expect her husband to raise objections like her mother, which made her doubt. Patriarchy permeated every corner of the family. James trapped Marilyn with love, which gave her unlimited control over her family. Under the illusion of freedom of rights, it is a microcosm of men's control over women, depriving her of the right to be herself and praising her efforts for her family. This is the best discipline for women in a patriarchal society. Marilyn's mother internalized the idea of

patriarchy under this set of rules and asked Marilyn to become a standard woman, and they become accomplices against women's pursuit of dreams and their own under patriarchy.

3.2. Family's Excessive Concern Contributed the Tragedy

Marilyn's dream was rekindled after her mother's death, and she vowed again that "she could never live like her" [5] (p84). The recipes with their mother's imprint became the carrier of her anger for her mother's little life. She left her family and embarked on a lonely dream without her husband and children. The identity of the wife's mother cannot hinder her steps, and her husband's opposition and incomprehension are not the reason for her to give up, but pregnancy once again broke the plan, making her dream trip bankrupt, and finally went away quietly, ending with Marilyn's compromise. Her return made the children cherish their mother's company more. Ness welcomed her mother with a solid hug, and Lydia hid the sad cookbook. Such behavior touched Marilyn's heart. "This is a sign" [5] (p143). She will never confine her daughter to her husband and family. She will "help Lydia achieve the goals she can" [5] (p143). Marilyn's passion for life was also recovered, and her goal became to help Lydia to achieve her dreams. It is distressing that Marilyn put her dreams and hopes on her children's shoulders: she wanted to help Lydia escape from the fate of women, but this behavior was no different from her mother's desire to make her a majority. Her extreme care for Lydia has become the last straw on her tired backbone, making Lydia embark on a path of no return. Marilyn's helping and shaping make Lydia internalize her mother's demands to her subconscious. Unconsciously, she became a murderer who oppressed her daughter.

Marilyn's resistance did not change James's attitude, but the growing repressive atmosphere of the family can prove the gradual change of the family. In the education of children, the patriarchal ideology has nowhere to hide from James and Marilyn: James wanted their children could integrate with the collective and make friends, but he never cared about the children's inner needs. Marilyn devoted her maternal love to Lydia, hoping to help her realize her dream. The center of the family shifted to Lydia. She wanted to meet her mother's requirements, but she didn't want to let her father down. However, she never properly expressed her demands. She could only use lies to please her parents. All of this was seen by the two brothers and sisters. The clever girl accidentally became friends with Jack, the bad boy in the community, which made Ness misunderstand and became the beginning of his estrangement with Lydia. Hannah saw through her sister's failure to do as her parents asked, and silently suffered the harm caused by Lydia's discarding of the necklace. But they didn't know the whole story of Lydia: she was anxious because of her mother's excessive concern, angry because of her father's relationship with Louisa, and miserable because no one can listen to her. She realized that happiness "is so fragile" [5] (p270). She could only choose to start again, but this step was on the road of no return.

Lydia's death became the last straw to crush the family and tore the last leaf of the broken family. The sweet and happy family of five is just an illusion. The communication between James and Marilyn is better than nothing. Even Lydia's case did not allow them to have a long conversation. When James' faith collapsed, he thought of Louisa, a student assistant with the same skin color as him. He finally found the sense of belonging he had been striving for, and the pain of losing his beloved daughter was temporarily alleviated. It seems that James found the proper reason for deviating: they are the same in this different culture, and no one around her would remind him of being different, and his tired heart could rest. No one will remind him of Lydia's death, and his mind is full of "happy blank" [5] (p71). Meanwhile, his wife Marilyn was tossing and turning. "Even the blink of an eye made her nervous" [5] (p71). She tried to capture all the memories related to Lydia and believed that the truth about her daughter's death would be discovered in Lydia's room. The sudden tragedy almost broke the heartstrings of Marilyn's fragile spirit, but her husband did not stand up and assume the responsibility as husband and

father, nor did he try to comfort his family's sadness. Instead, he became an ostrich, using the escape habit he developed since childhood to escape from the pain of himself and his family. In a depressed atmosphere, Ness was afraid to tell her parents that she had witnessed the secret of the relationship between her sister and Jack. Hannah also failed to provide her parents with clues about her sister's emotional loss. The temperature of the family dropped to zero.

It seems that children in Asian American families are naturally required by their parents to behave properly and perform well, so as not to lead to a bad view of the family. In school, Asian children under the colored glasses of teachers and classmates are born as bookworms and should be good at learning. In the community, Asian children cannot participate in other children's sports and entertainment activities because of various prejudices. In Lydia's family, James and Marilyn were originally troubled parents with many internal contradictions. They had no authority in family education. For Ness, Lydia, and Hannah, the double oppression of their parent's high expectations and the different visions of society created a difficult growth environment.

4. Love and Communication: Helping Dispel Misunderstanding

Cultural identification is not one-way, and culture is processed by the consciousness of the recipient when it is accepted. Therefore, once the colonists instill culture into the colonized, the essence of colonial culture can be dispelled by the conscious or unconscious resistance of the colonized, thus creating a cultural chaos space. Homi Bhabha named it the third space. In the third space, no culture exists independently, and cultural diversity can be truly realized only when cultures of different colors are displayed, interpreted, and bloomed through mutual consultation. Post-colonial cultural identities are dualistic and mixed. They fight against orthodox, strict, and single cultural identities in the form of free activities, which disintegrates the binary opposition between the colonists and the colonized, shows the color of multicultural identities, and helps individuals in multicultural situations to achieve identity.

From ancient times to the present, the flow and exchange of population have brought cultural collision and friction. The fusion of cultures in generate has sparked brilliantly, but it also brought sharp contradictions. With the continuous development of globalization, on the macro level, the transnational population flow has had a huge impact on the population structure, social economy, education model, and other aspects of each immigration destination country, which has attracted much attention. At the micro level, cross-racial marriage and family occupy a certain proportion in all countries. People born and raised under multicultural conditions are physically and mentally dispersed together, facing the problem of identity. Every family has different problems, and the psychological condition of each member should not be ignored. In the process of interpersonal communication, we should try our best to see the essence of differences through the phenomenon of cultural integration. For example, in Lydia's family, the apparent contradiction is due to the friction between the two different cultural backgrounds represented by James and Marilyn, but there are various disharmonious factors that individuals encounter due to differences in communication. Therefore, finding their position in a multicultural environment, and recognizing and facing up to their own mixed identity has become the basis for seeking self-reliance, while respecting, accepting, and containing differences are the attitudes needed to communicate with others.

4.1. The Recurrence of Concern

After Lydia's tragedy, James experienced a tortuous process from escaping from reality to returning to his family, leading his family to regain their belief in moving on. At first, he didn't want to hear the news of Lydia's death and see his family collapse. So, he went to Louisa's apartment for spiritual asylum. When he saw the "Barbecued Steamed Stuffed Bun" that was rejected in childhood [5] (p201) again, he changed his previous attitude of resistance, gradually

relax, and accept this delicious food from the East. In the past he didn't want to admit reappearing in his mind: in his school days, his mother prepared him a bun for lunch, but he never took it to school because it would show his difference from everyone else. Freud thought that conscious "memory reappearance" means the reconstruction of the past. All sides must face up to themselves and heal the wounds of the past. James's recollection of his mother here is the awakening of his consciousness, the prominence of his identity, and the healing of his past wounds: although in the United States, his parents have also given him love from his hometown. [6] The active memory reappearance represents that James gradually accepts the differences of different races, jumps out of the escapism thought, gradually faces up to his "other" identity, realizes that he has not disclosed his fear and hesitation to Marilyn and the children, and then can be frank with Marilyn after years of silence and repair the emotional loophole.

Marilyn found that James was cheating on Louisa, a young teaching assistant, which became the beginning of bringing the broken family back on track. The inevitable quarrel occurred, and James and Marilyn's long-held emotions were released at this moment. Their understanding of differences is the center of the quarrel, and their unbridled words become the sharp blade of mutual harm. But quarreling means communication, and the way of violence is the key to opening the door of the heart: after calming down, James understood Marilyn's regret and pain for giving up her studies for him and her family, and Marilyn knew that the difference she was pursuing was the last topic James wanted to talk about.

4.2. Everyone's Struggle for Reunion

In the face of the quarrel between her parents and James' departure from home, Hannah comforted her mother with a silent hug. Ness ran away from home to drown his sorrows in wine. When he was found by the police, he thought his father looked up and told him to go home. The whole family has methods to alleviate the pain accumulated during this time. After the storm, James did go home. This time, he saw the figure of Hannah. Hannah snuggled up to him, giving him encouragement and warmth that he had never noticed before. This time James and Marilyn talked about some topics that had never been opened: He showed her the autopsy report, and she gave him the cookbook. [5] (p279) Nothing changed, and Lydia would never come back. However, everything changed. The family is no longer centered on one person. James learned to choose the right words to express himself and was forgiven by Marilyn. They have learned to communicate and exchange, no longer fighting with their sons, but also paying attention to their naive and lovely little daughter. Lydia's disappearance brought her parents' reconciliation, which brought the family back to harmony and put it on the right track.

James and Marilyn, as well as Ness, Hannah, and Lydia, all love this family deeply, but they never express their feelings bravely. External factors led to James's alienation from himself, which may be the beginning of the family tragedy, but the controllable internal factors of the family are ignored by the parents and become the core factor of the tragedy. Lydia's sudden death forced them to have the opportunity to rethink their family relationship. Her death made everyone sad, but this was not the reason for breaking up the family.

Lydia's family lived in the gap between cultures and fell into the third space of mixed culture. James and Marilyn couldn't face up to their own identity because of the unfairness in their life, which affects the care and education of their children and caused the tragedy of Lydia's death. When the family was on the verge of fragmentation, James and Marilyn faced up to themselves and accepted their differences. They took on the responsibility of the family, and Ness and Hannah opened their hearts at this time and became the glue of the family. Finally, every family member should take responsibility, express their real needs, and regain their love for each other, which is the basis for Lydia's family to get out of the identity dilemma and rebuild their warm family. The premise of interracial marriage is love, but before love, it is more important to respect each other's differences and cultural backgrounds and to see the diversity of the

people we love. Equal communication is an important condition for family harmony. Only by listening patiently, expressing yourself reasonably, and exploring one's inner needs, can we tolerate ideas different from our own.

5. Conclusion

In Lydia's family in *Everything I Never Told You*, everyone is striving for warmth and harmony of the family, but the force exerted by everyone in different directions has accelerated the breakdown of the family. Lydia's death is like breaking the last spring, which makes everyone have to see what the problem is: James's painful memory is hard to face up to, or Marilyn is tired of getting encouragement from everyone, or Ness and Hannah's sneaking around, and Lydia's compromise? Deeply trapped in their identity dilemma, it is difficult to face up to their own identity, and they are tired of expressing their inner feelings, which have become the main culprits of family barriers. Discrimination and misunderstanding have always existed in this society, but only trust and sincerity between people can cross race and region, age and gender, and become a bridge of communication. From the perspective of postcolonialism, this article reviews Lydia's family's identity as the other due to various factors, as well as the communication contradictions within the family which caused the family crisis, and the changes made by each family after Lydia's tragedy, which brought the precarious family back on track. Today, with the increasing number of transnational and inter-ethnic families, the communication and exchange between people have become more sincere. I hope to take Lydia's tragedy as a warning, so that cross-cultural communication will no longer be an awkward topic, and there will be no more discrimination and misunderstanding.

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