

A Study on the Ethical Relationship of Cross-ethnic Family in Everything I Never Told You

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Abstract: Everything I Never Told You by Celeste Ng, a Chinese American writer, tells a tragic story of a cross-ethnic Chinese mixed-race family after suffering from trauma. It reveals the bondage of ethnicity, marriage and kinship to individuals by describing the contradictory relationship between obedience and resistance between parents and children. This paper will base on the specific reading on the novel, and apply the two theories--the Other Theory of Post-colonial and Feminism Theory of Beauvoir to analyze the novel--to explore the writer's family sense through the integrated analysis of representative family ethical relationship.

1. Introduction

Celeste Ng is a Chinese-American female writer born in the 1980s. Her debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, which took six years to write, was published in June 2014. As soon as the novel came out, it won Amazon's Book of the Year, NPR's Book of the Year, New York Times Bestseller, Huffington Post Book of the Year, and School Library Journal's Best of the Year Books and other titles (Sun Lu, 2015). Celeste Ng has also become a Chinese female writer who has enjoyed unanimous praise at home and abroad after Amy Tan. The plot of the novel mainly revolves around the relationship between husband and wife, parent-child relationship and brother-sister relationship within the family, involving racial discrimination, identity, family education and many other social realities.

Currently, scholars' research on novels mostly focuses on racial identity, mother-daughter relationship, characters and trauma, and few scholars interpret it from the perspective of family ethics. The novel involves many descriptions of the relationship between husband and wife, parent-child and brother-sister, and contains the author's unique concept of family. Therefore, from the perspective of family ethics, this paper will use the postcolonial other theory and Beauvoir's feminist theory to conduct a detailed analysis of the work, in order to clarify the family concept contained in the work. The concept of the "other" has been richly explained in postcolonial theory, developing from a single racial other to a "dual other" image on the two levels of race and culture (de Beauvoir, 2011). The development of feminism has made the other no longer limited to race and culture, and gender has also been included in the scope of the other (Zhang Jingyuan, 1999).

2. Ethical Relationship in Everything I Never Told You

2.1 Deviation of Couple

James is a Chinese born in the United States, and Marilyn is a white girl born in a traditional American family. It coincides with the prevalence of racism and feminism. Both of them are affected by this trend of thought. James was ostracized because of racism, so he wanted to become an ordinary American through Americanization; Marilyn wanted to be a doctor, free from the oppression of male authority, so she excluded the males of the entire white society. It can be seen that both James and Marilyn are in pursuit of an identity, but in the process of pursuit, they have formed a contradiction with society and cannot integrate into the mainstream society. The fundamental reason why James and Marilyn got married was to satisfy each other's ideal pursuit. Marilyn wants to be an independent new woman, breaking the shackles of white men on women; James wants to integrate into white society and is eager to be recognized by society. Being married can realize their ideals at the same time, so they get married without fully understanding each other, and contradictions arise from this.

James hopes to integrate into the mainstream society through Marilyn's white identity, but his wife's white identity makes him extremely uneasy in the marriage. He has always been worried that his wife will see his humbleness and weakness, and thus his image will collapse, so he has never revealed his family and growth experience, and this secret is hidden deep in his heart, which has formed a huge gap between them. After marriage, Marilyn is eager to achieve female independence and self-improvement, but James, who grew up in a Chinese family environment, is deeply influenced by machismo, and firmly believes that men are responsible for making money and supporting their families, and women are responsible for raising children and running the house. So when Marilyn offered to be a research assistant, James flatly refused: "When I become a tenured professor, you won't be thinking about going out to work, because my salary will be high, and there will be no shortage of money to spend." Marilyn was forced to become a housewife, unknowingly becoming her own mother, busy taking care of children, husband and housework every day.

James is the Chinese "Other", Marilyn is the female "Other", and they are both in the predicament of the "Other". James didn't know that Marilyn didn't want to be locked up in a family cage, she wanted to be respected by men, and she wanted to be a doctor. Marilyn didn't know that James was inferior because of his Chinese heritage, or that her husband was constantly worried about being abandoned because he married a white wife. They never communicated about each other's past, so Marilyn chose to quietly leave her husband and children behind and come to a city far away from home to fulfill her dream, making this interracial marriage and family gradually deviated from the normal track. James had a one-night stand with his first Oriental student, Louisa, after Lydia's death, and his betrayal nearly unraveled the interracial marriage.

2.2 Parent-child Imbalance

The parent-child ethics in cross-ethnic families is often expressed as the relationship of obedience and resistance between parents and children. Because of their special social situation, the parents have higher social expectations for their children. But children are independent individuals, so parents' expectations and children's self-constitution conflict with each other, resulting in parent-child imbalance.

In the novel, Lydia is the only child in the family who inherits the blue eyes of a white mother, so she becomes the darling of her parents, "a delicate flower in the eyes of her parents, a jewel in the palm of her hand, a precious baby, and the only one in her mother's heart forever. Every night when my father comes home, Lydia is the first to kiss" (Ng, 2014). From these descriptions it is

clear that Lydia holds a special place in the hearts of her parents. But while she gained more love from her parents, she also took on more of her parents' expectations. Her father wanted her to be an ordinary white woman, integrated into the group, making more friends, and being popular; When her mother Marilyn returned home, she saw that Lydia had discarded the cookbook she hated the most, which made her see the sustenance of her dreams, and she would "devote the rest of her life to guide Lydia, protect her, Like cultivating an ornamental rose..., shape its stalk to the perfect shape"(Ng, 2014). So Marilyn spent all her time and energy on tutoring her daughter Lydia's homework. She even asked Lydia to do physics homework and revise math problems during mealtime, but this also resulted in her having no time to make friends. In the second grade, Lydia was completely isolated at school and it was difficult to fit in, her father's wishes were shattered; and when her physical grades failed and her grades regressed, her mother's expectations were also shattered; She became more and more anxious and depressed. Lydia, who lived in the gap between Chinese and Western cultures, could hardly breathe, and finally chose to die after losing her brother, the only spiritual support.

In stark contrast to this is the couple's disgust with their son Nath. In the novel, the authority of James as a father is only particularly prominent when dealing with Nath, but his authority is resisted and questioned by Nath. When Nath was born, James had high hopes for him. But after the swimming incident, he became disappointed with James. When his son was reluctant to go into the water by the pool, his shyness and hesitation angered him, so he forced his son to jump into the pool, but his son was teased and neglected by other children in the pool. When his son's self-esteem was hurt, James, the father, did not come forward in time, but only let him learn to accept, which made the relationship between father and son strained. Then Nath couldn't play football because he was "too thin", couldn't play basketball because he was "too short", and couldn't play baseball because he was "too stupid"... This made James start to think about the childhood he was trying to forget, making him feel sad and happy. Ashamed, so he disliked Nath more and more. When her mother, Marilyn, ran away from home, Nath turned her attention to astronomy to fill her inner despair. When he asked James if he believed humans could land on the moon and come back, he slapped his son hard, thinking he was talking nonsense. And this slap also broke the emotional bond between father and son, making Nath completely alienated from his father. The mother also ignored Nath, and even after hearing the news that Nath was admitted to Harvard, he did not get the same attention as Lydia. Therefore, "home" brought him only a sense of loss, and he just wanted to escape quickly.

The James couple have been ignoring their youngest daughter Hannah. Marilyn felt that Hannah's presence forced her to give up on her dreams, so she disliked Hannah from the beginning. They moved Hannah's cradle into the attic bedroom, often forgetting her existence. Marilyn had four plates on the table one night, and she didn't realize she was missing one until Hannah came to the table; whenever Hannah was near her mother and father, they would quickly shake her off her body , or coax her away. While pampering the eldest daughter, James and Marilyn's indifferent and neglectful parent-child attitude towards their son and younger daughter can be seen from the description of the novel.

The formation of parent-child relationship problem is not only affected by the extension of cross-ethnic family to the children's generation, but also affected by the family responsibility. The abnormal parent-child relationship has different degrees of negative impact on the characters of the three children: the eldest daughter deviates from the mainstream of society because she cannot bear too much love and expectation; the son becomes more determined and independent because his parents hate him; The younger daughter became extremely sensitive and precocious due to her parents' neglect.

2.3 Sibling Rivalry

The parents' biased love for their children makes Lydia, who is at the center of the family, and the neglected brother Nath and sister Hannah form a tension structure of mutual opposition, which also lays a hidden danger for the deterioration of the brother-sister relationship later.

Marilyn's return changes the family landscape. Everyone in his life, mother, father, even himself, was sliding, sliding towards Lydia, and under Lydia's gravitational pull, no one could resist. So Nath pushed Lydia into the water by the lake. But he realized right away that even without Lydia, the world was still unfair. Moreover, his parents' expectation for Lydia were too high, and she didn't want it either. So after a few seconds, Nath jumped into the water and pulled Lydia to the surface, and Lydia also held Nath tightly, meaning: don't let go. Ten years later, the bond between the two still shows no sign of loosening.

Hannah, the youngest member of the family, tries every day to "receive the family's vision and mind, so as to ensure that the territorial division of the family does not change in the slightest"(Ng, 2014). She never dared to sit very close to her brother Nath, her sister Lydia, or her parents, whenever she came near, they would "quickly shake her off of them, or put her coax away"(Ng, 2014). Hannah knew exactly where she was in the family, so when she saw her sister Lydia sneaking out of the house late at night, she didn't take any action, thinking for a moment that she "can have the best place on the table, Sitting there, just in time to see the lilac bushes in the yard outside the window. The big bedroom downstairs can also belong to her. At dinner, everyone will pass the potatoes to her first, the father will tell her jokes, the brother will tell her secrets , she can also get her mother's brightest smile"(Ng, 2014).

The parents' excessive attention to Lydia makes her brother, Nath, and sister, Hannah, jealous of Lydia while they are in love with her. But the blood relationship allows them to support each other and satisfy their psychological need for love in the stressful family environment.

3. Reflections on Family Ethical Relations

The marriage of Marilyn and James was incompatible in the context of racial discrimination and cultural conflict, and their children could not escape this fate. From the perspective of family ethics, parents James and Marilyn put too much emphasis on their unrealized ideals and neglected their responsibilities to their children, leading to the disintegration of the entire family. Marilyn fled her family for her feminist dreams, but failed to take on her responsibilities as a wife and mother, causing trauma to her husband and children, as well as subsequent family crises and conflicts between children. As a father, James thought that his daughter is living a glorious life, so he had always encouraged her to make more friends and realize his own ideal of "being gregarious", but he had never really understood her daughter's real situation; He was always in denial about the growth of his son, Nath, until he was admitted to Harvard University.

In the ethical relationship between husband and wife, Marilyn's departure hurt her husband, but when she returned to the family, James chose to accept it without hesitation; when James' extramarital affair was discovered by Marilyn, he felt ashamed and chose to return, and got his wife's forgiveness. In the parent-child relationship, after the tragedy of Lydia, the James couple realized the preciousness of the other two children who had been neglected by them, and chose to carry on the continuation of love on them; In the ethical relationship between siblings, Nath and Hannah also understood that brotherhood is mutual support. Lydia's death objectively promoted the communication among family members, thus the family full of internal contradictions was reborn.

4. Conclusion

Based on a close reading of the text and with the help of the concept of the “other” in the post-colonial theory and the feminist theory, this paper discusses the ethical relations of the cross-ethnic families in marriage and parenthood from the perspectives of ethnicity and gender, the specific manifestations are as follows: the couple deviates from each other due to the collision of ethnic identity and feminist identity; the parent-child imbalance is caused by the interference of parents’ will on the growth of their children; the emotional gap between siblings is caused by the imbalance of parents’ love for their children. Finally, through the special treatment of the little daughter Hannah, the novel puts forward the viewpoint that family members need to communicate with each other. Only through communication can we feel the love of our families and resolve family’s conflicts with the warmth of love.

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