

# *Eulogy and Reflection--Maternal Writing in Little Fires Everywhere*

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**Keywords:** Celeste Ng, Little Fires Everywhere, Maternal Writing

**Abstract:** Maternity becomes an increasingly prominent theme in literature works. "Maternal worship", a traditional culture eclipsed by patriarchal culture, has been paid attention to and highlighted by more writers. They sing the praises of motherhood, but they also shackle it. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, in addition to eulogizing maternity, Celeste Ng also breaks the myth of perfect motherhood, restores the human nature of a mother, and reveals the female consciousness of a mother. This unique maternal writing and narrative strategy of "absent father" show her reflection on maternal existence and her self-examination of female soul and value.

## 1. The Framework of Maternal Writing

Maternity, from a biological point of view, is a mother's instinct to care for and love her children. However, in the social background, maternity not only refers to the blood nature and relationship with her children, but also covers all the spiritual qualities with maternal bearing. Social maternity is a kind of powerful love, a kind of spirit of selfless dedication, a kind of quality of sacrifice and tolerance, representing the most extensive and tender love in the world. Maternity is the greatest feature of women, as well as the most essential feature of women. In the patriarchal society of ancient times, maternal writing, as a kind of implicit cultural character, permeates literature works, yet existing in a hidden state. But with the reform of modern culture, the liberation of thought along with the heightened consciousness of "humans", "maternal worship", a traditional culture eclipsed by patriarchal culture, has been paid attention to and highlighted by more writers. Consequently, maternity becomes an increasingly prominent theme in literature works. Especially during the new period, with the rise of feminist thought and the promotion of female status, more and more writers focus on the subject of maternity, excavate the connotation of maternity in their works, and try their best to show the beauty of women from their appearance to inner qualities. Maternity is not only a means by which feminist writers revolt patriarchal society, but also a universal connotation worthy of being praised. "Motherhood" is defined by the patriarchal society to be kind, tolerant, noble, generous, dedicated, selfless, etc, and at the same time, it has become the "fertilizer" and "pouch" that men are supposed to enjoy. For a long time literature practice constantly deduces the myth of motherhood, and expands the moral character of motherhood and maternal energy. Maternal love, defined by patriarchy, has been regarded as "the Great Round and the Great Container, which tends to contain everything". [1] In Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, she reveals Mia's love for her

daughter, Pearl and her care for the Richardsons as well as Bebe, thus eulogizing Mia's maternity.

However, in addition to motherhood and responsibility, there is a need for mothers to gain self-actualization and self-growth. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng breaks the aesthetic expectation of the traditional patriarchal culture on maternal love, removes the additional patriarchal cultural meaning on mothers, and meanwhile, returns the original appearance of maternal love in its true nature. Thus, the halo of divinity on the head of a mother is removed. Meantime she expresses her pursuit and yearning for the independent healthy living space of modern women and the natural but ideal motherhood. Heroine, Mia is a typical representative of this kind of maternity. In addition to the eulogy of Mia's Maternity, in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, she reflects on the ridiculous stereotype on maternity. She urges women all over the world to pursue their dreams in addition to their duties as mothers. As a consequence, She builds a harmonious relationship in which the mother and her daughter become the main body of each other, promote each other and develop together.

## 2. The Eulogy of Maternity in *Little Fires Everywhere*

Mao Dune once said, "Motherhood is an immense force, which is a grant, a sacrifice, a blessing, a comfort, and a blandness... All creation comes from the mother." [2] In this chapter, I mainly fix on Mia's philanthropy. First, as a mother, Mia shows great love for her daughter, Pearl. In effect, Mia is a surrogate mother during college for a couple who could not have their kid to help pay for her education owing to her lack of money. However, as her belly grows, her maternal nature becomes stronger. The baby is bones of her bones and flesh of her flesh. [3] She is reluctant to give them her child. As a result, Mia gives up her studies-- her favorite photography and takes Pearl with her to live a nomadic life. For more than a decade, they live on each other. She pursues her career in spite of their hard life. Mia takes Pearl from place to place in search of inspiration. Mia gives all her love to Pearl and teaches Pearl to be independent and self-respecting. After they settle into their new home in Shaker Heights, Pearl is longing for the life in which they never remove from a city to another. Therefore, Mia makes up her mind to settle down and gives her daughter the stable life she wants. For Mia, her daughter, Pearl is not just a person. As she says in the novel: "your child was a place, a kind of Narnia, a vest eternal place where the present you were living and the past you remembered and the future you longed for all existed at once".

Apart from her Pearl, Mia also shows great care for other people, including Bebe, a Chinese woman marginalized by American society and the Richardsons, especially the youngest girl, Ivvy in the family. As a representative of the voiceless disadvantaged group, Babe is particularly pitiful. Abandoned by her boyfriend and losing her job due to her giving birth to a baby, Babe feels desperate and finally abandons her baby in front of a fire station, who is later raised by a wealthy white couple. But when her life is back to normal and she recovered emotionally, she wants her daughter back. In her world, she is an underdog, an immigrant, a woman, and a person of color. She struggles extremely hard for custody of her children, but it does not work. Everyone in Shaker Heights blames and criticizes her. They do not give her right to defend for herself. In the mainstream society, Bebe loses her voice. It is Mia who shows sympathy for her. Mia spares every effort to help her and offers every possible means to her. For Bebe, in such a large white-dominated society, only Mia gives her a ray of warmth and light.

Ivvy, the youngest girl in the family, is looked on to be lunatic. She is ignored and marginalized by the whole family. Ivvy's siblings regard her as the freshman, the black sheep, the wild card. She seems to be brave, independent. As a matter of fact, her inner world is extremely eager for love and sense of identity. In the novel, Izzy's important guide is Mia who has rich social experience, mature ideology along with rich knowledge. [4] Mia is the only one who understands the kindness and

gentleness behind Ivy's stubbornness and knows how to bring out the best in her. Mia respects Ivy's choice as well. It is the sense of identity and encouragement from Mia that make the ignorant and stubborn girl become mature gradually.

Except Ivy, other kids in the family enjoy the care from Mia, like Lexie and Moody, even all the members in the family. Eventually, Mia and Pearl have to leave Shaker Heights on account of what Mr Richardson does. Mia finds out their privacy, but an eye for an eye is not her choice. Mia takes a series of photos with their own things. To the others it was just another photo, but to them it was unbearably intimate, like catching a glimpse of your own naked body in a mirror. [5] Mia forgives everything with a generous heart, which is one of the qualities of maternity--kindness, tolerance and forgiveness.

### 3. The Reflection of Maternity in *Little Fires Everywhere*

In addition to eulogizing maternity, Celeste Ng also breaks the myth of perfect motherhood, restores the human nature of a mother, and reveals the female consciousness of a mother. Angels are not mothers, and of course demons are not mothers. Motherhood is not a cure-all to save women, nor is it a tie that fetters women. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng manages to find the best sweet point between maternal nature and human nature, thus the brilliance of maternal nature can really shine. Celeste Ng's version of androgyny is reflected in Mia. She is masculine in her persistent pursuit of art as well as feminine in her tenderness to Pearl and other children in Richardson family. In her inner world, reason and sensibility are intertwined, and the two are integrated and inseparable. Mia never cares about what others think of her. She only follows her heart and pursues her goal and freedom. Since she was a little girl, she has been trudging along the way in her quest for art. In particular, during the period when she brought up Pearl on her own, they lived a tough life. However, She never gives up her dream--her favorite photography. Instead of confining herself to the kitchen and the kid, she manages to balance family and career. As for Mia, the realization of her dreams and self-worth is as important as her daughter, Pearl.

Apart from above independent motherhood, Celeste Ng's narrative strategy of "absent father" allows a mother to be in a dominant position of the family, thus highlighting her alternative maternal writing. Chen Xiaolan states: "the best way to deny something is to make it die, and death means the end of rights." [6] The form of "absent father" is a very cost-effective narrative strategy that negates patriarchy and places a mother at the center of the family. In Celeste Ng's works, the protagonists are all female characters. Men are put in an invisible position. Mr Richardson is described briefly. For Pearl's natural father, he is depicted with the minimum of the words. With this method, can Celeste Ng break down the man-dominated society, showing the independence of motherhood.

### 4. Conclusion on Maternal Writing

Human civilization is built on the basis of patriarchy, which inevitably makes motherhood lose its power in both spiritual pursuit and physiological desire under the strict rules of patriarchal culture. In the name of "mother", patriarchal culture simplifies and even alienates maternal love and desire as a function only related to fertility. Women who become or will become "mothers" have been delineated as a moral symbol completely insulated from love and desire. Under the shackles of traditional morality, motherhood surpasses sorrow with joy, surpasses desire, and surpasses everything, thence only mechanically following the morality of motherhood and the instinct of motherhood, causing mothers to multiply their kids endlessly. This is not only the sorrow of motherhood, but the lack of female. As Nietzsche says, "Everything about a woman is a mystery, and everything about a woman has only one answer; that is procreation." [7] Life gestation being an

important event, maternal status as the subject of birth is always inferior to paternal status as the participant. Under the control of patriarchal reproductive culture, motherhood inevitably becomes the tool of reproduction. Men take maternity for granted. They fetter a large number of woman in the name of “maternity”. In reality, under the cloak of divinity, motherhood also has its own dreams and needs for self-realization. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng sings the praises of motherhood while she also removes the sacred mantle from mothers, showing her reflection on maternal existence and her self-examination of female soul and value.

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