

The Lost Other in Community: James's Dilemma of Cultural Identity in *Everything I Never Told You*

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Abstract: *Everything I Never Told You* is the debut novel of a Chinese-American woman writer Celeste Ng. By demonstrating the invisible contradictions behind the seemingly harmonious interracial Lee family and revealing the death of the favorite daughter Lydia, it shows that the minority group of Chinese Americans are faced with the dilemma of cultural identity under the influence of two cultures and they hold a strong desire to build a community in the mainstream white society. This paper intends to focus on the protagonist James as a representative of Chinese Americans to explore the cause of his identity dilemma in community as well as tragic consequences happen to his life, marriage, and family from the perspective of post-colonialism. Despite the fact that Chinese Americans find it difficult to search for self-identity as the lost other, they have always aspired to build a community free from discrimination and marginalization in the space where different cultures meet.

Keywords: *Everything I Never Told You*; Other; Cultural identity; Community

1. Introduction

Celeste Ng is a Chinese American woman writer who has so created three novels: *Everything I Never Told You*, *Little Fires Everywhere*, and *Our Missing Hearts*. With the childhood experiences of migrating from Hong Kong to the United States of America, she has devoted to narrating stories of the minority. Since the most striking feature of American society is the diversity of races and cultures, there are irreconcilable contradictions among all ethnic groups from beginning to the end^[1]. For Chinese American writers, the dilemma of cultural identity has become a major issue explored in the works. Celeste Ng also focuses on the crisis of cultural identity Chinese Americans faced in the white mainstream society.

As the debut work, *Everything I Never Told You* has won quite a few significant awards such as New York Times Bestseller and Amazon's No.1 Bestseller of 2014 since it was published. Set in 1960s, it explores the mysterious death of the favorite daughter Lydia in an interracial family and discloses the contradictions among the family members: the Chinese American father James, the white American mother Marilyn, and their three children. In this cross-cultural family, the dilemma of cultural identity challenges every family member. James, as a marginalized other, is stuck in different cultures and roles and loses his identity. However, his desire and pain can be deconstruct in community.

Although *Everything I Never Told You* was published in 2014, there are still a number of relevant studies. Scholars at home and abroad have approached this work from different perspectives. For foreign studies, Ningsih employs Stuart Hall's cultural studies to explore multiculturalism in this work to discuss the reason why characters cannot adapt to the society^[2]. Kairunnisa analyzes the feature of "dysfunctional family" in the novel from the perspective of psychoanalysis^[3]. For domestic studies, Wang Hua discusses the narrative ethics and pathological writing characteristics of the work to reveal individual tragedy^[4]. Wang Fang examines the function of visual pressure by the agency of Sartre's existentialism^[5]. In general, the discussion of family education, racial and gender discrimination, identity of Chinese Americans and narrative strategies are primarily centered on. However, the characterization of James and its link with the theme of pursuing a harmonious community is yet to be further explored. Therefore, this paper intends to focus on James's cultural identity and make essential connections with the theme refinement in a broader context of establishing the cultural community shared by the ethnic minority of Chinese Americans and find feasible solution to the identity dilemma they are faced with in the white mainstream society.

2. James's Loss of Cultural Identity

James was born and brought up in the United States of America, but his father obtained immigration status by means of Paper Son, an illegitimate approach to gaining legal entry by falsifying the identity. For ethnic minority group of Chinese Americans, it is hard for them to establish cultural identity in the collision of two cultures, especially the offspring of Chinese Americans. On the one hand, they are not accepted by the white mainstream society, on the other hand, they cannot agree with Chinese traditions insisted by their parents.

As a result, James has been ashamed of his Chinese-American identity as a second-generation immigrant and his efforts to blend in is frequently proved to be futile. He is still marginalized in the struggle to fit into the white mainstream society, which makes him confused about his cultural identity. James, a representative of Chinese Americans, demonstrates the crisis of loss of cultural identity the ethnic minority group is faced with in community.

3. James as Marginalized Other

From Said's perspective, "the Other" is defined as the object of Western cultural construction and representation in relation to the Orient representing the antithesis and counterpart to Western culture^[6]. Based on this, non-western beings are regarded as marginalized, alienated, and thoroughly "othered", serving as a mirror and contrast to Western culture.

Growing up in America, James is immersed in American culture as well as native education ever since he was born. Nevertheless, he is repeatedly rejected by the white mainstream society he wants to integrate into due to the family background. According to Hall, cultural identity is a type of identity cognition formed by individuals or groups under the influence of culture, which provides people with a sense of belonging and alliance^[7]. Therefore, it is not the geographic locations that determines the identity but the space that provides a sense of mental support and belonging. This is what James lacks because as ignored "other", they are neither embraced by the place they grow up. Nor do they have any roots or home to belong to^[8].

During James's childhood, he has suffered fierce mockery. For example, he pretends to forget the family tree assignment only to hide the family secrets of the illicit Paper Son identity. In order to avoid speaking English with an accent, he no longer speaks Chinese with his parents. The strong desire of Chinese Americans for blending in the white society is not only found in the recognition of the white culture and values, but also manifested in their behavior of rejecting national culture and symbols with any feature of national culture^[9]. For James, he also adopts various strategies to fit into the mainstream society of America in order to abandon the ethnic identity.

However, the ridicule he received as a child "Chink can't find China"^[10] always haunts him. Even though he has born his father's words in mind: "Be a model.", and performed well enough to get a PhD at Harvard, he is unfortunately disqualified from being a teacher here due to the Oriental look. Despite the fact that he has become a model minority who seemingly achieves material success, the embarrassment and fear that "He is the only one who is different"^[11] is a feeling James could never get rid of. James wants to search for sense of belonging in the community, and he tried many times to blend in the white society but get refused. Therefore, he feels lost and continues to lose his identity in the collision of two different cultures.

4. James's Love with Marilyn--Silence Against Fear of Abandonment

James, a man with an Oriental face who teaches the course of cowboys at college, and Marilyn, a white woman who craves individuality and self-accomplishment are attracted to each other and fall in love rapidly because they respectively find what they desire through love. When the Oriental culture buried in the unconscious meets the essence of the Western culture, the differences between them create a gap in the interracial marriage.

In James's eye, "he had never felt he belonged here, even though he'd been born on American soil"^[12]. Thus, Marilyn's bold and active love expression is not only a manifestation of her own love, but also a signal of the dreaming integration the white society has sent him. This is the first reason he came to love her: because she had blended in so perfectly, because she had seemed so completely and utterly at home^[13]. This goes the same with his desire since the loneliness of not being recognized by others makes

James yearn to be a person who is so ordinary in the crowd^[14].

Marilyn, a white woman raised in a single-parent family, finds dissatisfaction in the traditional role of housewife chosen by her mother. Instead, she inherits the Western cultural inclination towards individuality, driving her desire to pursue personal fulfillment in life. Upon meeting James, who teaches a course on American cowboy culture, she discerns in this Chinese American man the coveted qualities she yearns for. This is how their love begins and also how the seeds of a crisis are planted in their marriage in the collision of two different cultures.

When the police investigate Lydia's death, Marilyn asks different questions and hopes the institution do their best, but James does not say much and keeps bowing to the officer. Because of this, Marilyn complains: "Unlike some people, I don't just kowtow to the police"^[15]. As the descendant of Paper Son, James gives a wide berth to the police, not to mention challenging their authority. The fear of identity loss is deeply engraved on the personal consciousness of the Chinese American group, which has led to the stereotype that they are defensive and obedient to the authority^[16]. For Marilyn, she feels irritated for her husband's submissive attitude. However, from James's perspective, it is a great irony since "kowtow" is a typical Oriental word, a cultural symbol that refers to respect and submission to authority, especially to the authority or emperor in Asian cultures^[17].

Marilyn's expression seems to remind James of the Oriental identity he hopes to get rid of. Consequently, this makes James sensitive and ashamed to the fact that he is once again regarded by his wife as a marginalized other. In Tönnies's viewpoint, blood ties hold the greatest potential to develop into communal relations, and family life is deemed as basis for communal life^[18]. The spiritual bond formed through shared experiences between family members and the mutual care between individuals ought to play a vital role in family. However, the estrangement between James and his wife on significant issues not only affects the development of community relationship, but also distorts James' self-cognition.

Shame makes the disadvantaged member of the minority groups deny themselves and alienate their ethnic characteristics so as to integrate into the mainstream American society. In this process, James's inner recognition of cultural identity is gradually lost. Thereafter he falls into the vicious circle of self-denial and begins to have an affair with Louisa, the teaching assistant, only to grasp mental support. For him, the one who shares the same skin color will not remind him of his ethnic identity at least. As the white mainstream American culture excluded James and Marilyn also ignores his desire as the one who is supposed to know him well. Thus, he chooses to keep silent to Marilyn.

When discovering clues of Lydia's death, James vents the grief by dating with Louisa for he thinks all details related to Lydia are not enough to repair the cracks in each other's hearts. When he dives himself into the affair for a short time, he realizes the face with similar cultural genes does not bring him the comfort, which indicates the idea that marrying a Chinese American can help him find himself is a myth. Basically, the reason lies in his fear of being exiled by the mainstream culture and community, especially Marilyn.

For all the time, James keeps the traumatic feelings to himself instead of communicating with Marilyn. "When they had married, he and Marilyn had agreed to forget about the past". In spite of their commitment, James never lets go of his past. Not only has he never confessed to his wife about his past, but he also worries about getting abandoned when she finds out everything. It is the degree to which an individual recognizes and accepts the role and characteristics of the group he belongs to, and a cognition of emotion and values when regarding oneself as a member of a certain group that decides one's cultural identity. For James, however, he is unable to locate himself in American culture nor can he make an emotional connection with Chinese culture, which explains his fear and sense of displacement demonstrated in family and society. "the blood itself is only the basis for living together, while the common life experiences make it possible for individuals to gain recognition from members of the same group and then establish a solid community". James and Marilyn lack mutual understanding and independence, making the intimacy between them fragile. James lacks self-awareness, while Marilyn lacks independence, rendering them unable to build a stable emotional bond in community.

James finally opens up to his wife, revealing the long-held emotions he has harbored. "In the dark they are careful of each other, as if they know they are fragile, as if they know they can break". In essence, the reconciliation between James and Marilyn symbolizes the reunion of a cross-racial family marked by adversity. As partners and parents, they break the silence through communication, representing the journey of Eastern and Western cultures from conflict towards integration.

5. James's Love for Lydia--Expectation to Fit in

Among the three children they have raised, Lydia is the most cherished. James is particularly drawn to Lydia's striking combination of her mother's blue eyes and her father's black hair, which earns her extra care and attention. However, the blue eyes inadvertently bear the expectations from her father. "Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about". In James's heart, he longs to assimilate into white mainstream society but is continually regarded as an unimportant other due to the Oriental appearance. Despite his material success through relentless efforts, he remains friendless, feeling marginalized in American culture. James pins his hopes on his daughter Lydia to fulfill his dream of fitting in, leading them both to reassess their cultural identities.

On Lydia's birthday, James selects a book titled as *How to Win Friends and Influence People* as a gift for her, but it is not what Lydia needs. When given the present, Lydia felt "her heart in her chest like a pellet of ice, sliding down out of reach". James's choice stems from a fear of her experiencing the isolation he endured in the past, so he expects her to be popular.

James also asks Lydia to call her classmate whom she is not familiar with so as to make friends. Lydia struggles to maintain conversations and hide her discomfort. Although she tries hard to pretend to fit in, she still fails to comprehend why this action pleases her father. James believes that if he had learned to be popular earlier, his life would have been different. Tönnies proposes that the role of a father, in illustrating the significance of community, entails more than just fulfilling the task of raising children; it also involves educating and imparting a wealth of personal life experiences, which fosters a genuine mutual relationship in the process between father and children. James does not guide Lydia in interpersonal relationships and neglects to share his own experiences with her. As a result, positive interactions between father and daughter fail to develop, leading to new suffering in new forms and ultimately culminating in tragedy.

James yearns to be a native American but is consistently isolated as a different other. Simultaneously, he hopes for both Lydia and himself to seamlessly integrate into white society and foster harmonious relationships with others, reflecting the collectivism promoted by Eastern culture--"the group as a whole, harmonious relationships among people, and avoid personality". Superficially, he appears to pursue integration into mainstream white culture, but in reality, his pursuit aligns with the principles of Eastern culture. Therefore, the reality traps James and Lydia in two distinct cultures, posing formidable challenges to their cultural identities and leaving them as insignificant others for an extended period.

In essence, James's personal aspiration does not devote to establishing a stable and tolerant community within the family. Instead, it destroys the emotional bonds between father and daughter. There is no denying that Lydia's death reminds James that they are stuck in the boundary of two cultures, and the dilemma of not being able to find their cultural identity makes them feel like a hybrid. Nonetheless, as marginalized others, the key to avoiding tragedy lies in facing the pain, sharing experiences, and deriving strength from change.

6. Conclusions

In *Everything I Never Told You*, James is eager to blend into mainstream American culture, but his identity of heterogeneous culture cannot be erased. For James, he wants to avoid the influence of traditional Oriental culture while he is not accepted by the mainstream white culture, which makes him a marginalized other experiencing neglect and exclusion. The gap between desire and reality leaves him trapped in a cultural identity dilemma, which not only causes misunderstanding throughout his marriage with Marilyn that she will still discriminate against him and eventually abandon him, but also creates distorted care and expectation between his daughter Lydia and him -- both becoming the speechless isolated other but not being able to understand each other.

By narrating James Lee's interracial family as a miniature model, *Everything I Never Told You* reveals the crisis of cultural identity behind the seemingly successful and harmonious family by uncovering the mystery of their daughter Lydia's death. James as one of the main characters in the article, has long suffered from loss of cultural identity in the white mainstream society because of the mockery he has experienced, which affects both himself and everyone around him in the family.

In a word, James's tragedy extends beyond his individual experience to become the catalyst for Lydia's death and the overall tragedy of the whole family. Despite reconciling with his wife Marilyn,

who embodies mainstream American culture, James continues to grapple with the torment of losing his cultural identity in the gap between two cultures. The plight of James's family serves as a microcosm of society, vividly illustrating that the marginalization faced by the minority group of Chinese Americans who possess dual cultural identities yet are perennially regarded as the unimportant other, as well as their enduring, suppressed desire for a harmonious and tolerant ethnic, cultural community within the white mainstream society of America.

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