

A Brief Analysis of Marginalization in *Everything I Never Told You**

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Chinese American writer Celeste Ng has portrayed images of “marginal man” in her novel *Everything I Never Told You*. Centering the narration on the death of Lydia, with her own immigrant identity and cross-ethnic marriage, Celeste Ng has penetrated into the marginal culture in American society 1970s, exposing characters’ marginal condition caused by ethnic identity, gender and sexual orientation.

Keywords: *Everything I Never Told You*, marginalization, culture

Introduction

Celeste Ng, a post-80s Chinese American writer, publishes her debut *Everything I Never Told You* at the end of 2014. The novel tells a story about a family composed of a Chinese husband, a white wife and three mixed-blooded children. Starting from a suspense, the story gradually extends to the level of delicate psychiatric description, involving the first and second generation of immigrants, love, marriage, study, death of mother, extramarital love affair, leaving home, homosexuality and so on. The novel got a lot praise, such as from *O MAGAZINE*, which pointed that there is much here that might impress Pulitzer and Man Booker judges, and from *LOS ANGELES TIMES* saying that *Everything I Never Told You* is at heart the beautifully crafted story of a family in pain, and the many reasons, personal and societal, that the Lees have lived most of their lives as strangers to one another. Just as *LOS ANGELES TIMES* says, this paper thinks that the Lees are strangers, who are marginalized by the society and by themselves; so this paper discusses the marginalization in this novel.

The theory of “Marginal Man” can be traced back to the beginning of 20th century in America, and with the development of civil rights movement in 1950-60, Latin-American immigration in 1990s, “Marginal Man” theory has grown up and matured and been applied in many other fields, such as the research of identity, analysis of literature (ZHANG, 2010, p. 64). This paper analyses the novel *Everything I Never Told You* from the following three aspects, “Marginal Man”, “marginalization” and “marginal culture”.

Marginal Man

The theory of “Marginal Man”, though, proposed by Georg Simmel who established the concept of “stranger”, was defined by Georg Simmel’s student Robert Park as “marginal man is the one between two cultures and two societies which never have penetrated or mixed together” (ZHANG, 2010, p. 65). Sobal Jeffery, in his

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“Bias against ‘Marginal’ Individuals in Jury Wheel Selection”, marks the denotation of “marginal individual”: female, juvenile, old, black, single, no-voting-right people, new member in community (ZHANG, 2010, p. 65), so based on the definition and denotation of marginal man, the Lees are all labelled with “marginal man”.

Firstly, James Lee, the father, as the second immigration, is the first oriental student in Lloyd. He strongly feels that he is different from others and the outside environment. The feeling of marginal man makes him “spend twelve years at Lloyd and never feel at home” (Ng, 2015, p. 44). Secondly, Mrs. Lee (Marilyn), as a housewife in 1950s, has always been dreaming to enter medical field dominated by men then. Her desire to be a doctor is so strong that even after being married and having two children, Lydia and Nath, Marilyn leaves home to prepare the entrance exam of medical college, but fails and finally comes back home. So James’s experience as an ethnical “marginal man” and Marilyn’s experience as a gender “marginal man” work together on their three children, and finally cause the death of Lydia, because Lydia, on the one hand, can’t get rid of the influence from her father who always tries to change his identity as a ethnical marginal man but has no single white friend; on the other hand, she can’t escape from her mother’s endeavor to change the gender marginal identity, but her failures in physics exam make the dream of being doctor impossible. Those pressures gradually snowball and finally crush Lydia.

In the novel, not only the major characters, but some minor characters also have been shadowed with marginal man, such as the younger son Nath and the younger daughter Hannah, who are marginalized by their parents in their family. Just as mentioned above, their parents have so indulged in their own problems that they intentionally or unintentionally have ignored these two kids. Therefore, lonely Nath imagines that the rocket can take “mothers who disappeared, fathers who didn’t love you, kids who mocked you” (Ng, 2015, p. 133) to fly into outer space. As for Hannah, the youngest and the most helpless daughter, is almost invisible at home. “They set up her nursery in the bedroom in the attic, where things that were not wanted were kept, and even when she got older, now and then each of them would forgot, fleetingly, that she existed” (Ng, 2015, p. 160). Besides Nath and Hannah, in this novel, Jack and her mother are also marginalized in certain aspects. Jack who is suspected to be involved in Lydia’s death actually is a homosexual boy having hidden love to Nath; Jack’s mother, Janet Woolf, a tall, slender and elegant single mother gossiped a lot by other community members, surprises Marilyn because of her identity—a female doctor.

Those characters mentioned above, more or less live far away from the main stream: some of them are ethnically marginalized because of their skin color; some of them are marginalized in occupation choice because of gender; some of them are marginalized because of their marriage condition; and some of them are marginalized because of their sex orientation.

Marginalization

Marginalization can be found in marginal man’s emotion and mentality. Robert Park holds that there is “split-self” conflict in marginal man’s mind, and Goldberg believes that in any kind of marginal culture, marginal man is always exposed to the situation: insecurity, contradictory feeling, extreme self-consciousness and long-term nervousness (ZHANG, 2010, p. 66).

“Split-self” conflict triggers Lydia’s death. Lydia seems never to have real self, because in herself there is a constant struggle performed by the two “marginal man”—James and Marilyn. On the one hand James, with the hatred of being different, has an overwhelming yearn to blend in the outside environment. In the last quarrel with Marilyn he bursts out “you’ve never been in a room where no one else looked like you. You’ve never had

people mock you to your face. You've never been treated like a stranger" (Ng, 2015, p. 242). While Marilyn is eager to be different from others, and in this way it is possible for her to go into the male-dominating medical field from the marginal situation as female but her dream has been defeated by the real world. Though she "stopped trying to be different, (she) did just what all the other girls were doing. (She) got married. (She) gave all that up..., she hopes her (Lydia) different from other girls ...but (she) didn't want her (Lydia) to be just like everyone else.... (She) wanted her to be exceptional" (Ng, 2015, p. 243). Obviously, the two voices from James and Marilyn split and confuse Lydia. So when she knows that Nath, the one whom she trusts most, is going to leave her for Harvard, she suddenly realizes that she can't have Nath to support her anymore, that it is the time to release her true self from the "split-self" conflict. Then she rows a boat to the middle of the lake and jumps into water, which, she believes, can prove she has already been taught well how to swim by Nath, and prove she can do something by herself.

Besides split-self conflict, extreme self-consciousness and long-term nervousness can also be found in the novel. In his graduation yearbook, compared with other white students, "James' ears, blushing pink in real life, were a deep and unnatural gray... his mouth slightly open, as if he had been caught trespassing" (Ng, 2015, p. 44). And when Marilyn goes back to school after being married and leaving home, she finds stiffness and tension in her hand writing, so she has to encourage herself to overwhelm her inferiority, "I am just as smart as the others. That I belong" (Ng, 2015, p. 138). James and Marilyn are more sensitive than others to their identity of marginal man, so they are more sensitive than others whether they are labelled with "alien" by outside environment, and are more eager to blend in the outside environment; but this strong self-consciousness frays their nerves, then highlights their loneliness. When James is inquired by the police when Lydia is lonely, the author Celeste Ng dissects James inner mind,

As one of the only two Orientals, at Middlewood High—the other being her brother, Nathan—Lee stood out in the halls. He knows that feeling: All those faces fish-pale and silent and staring. He had tried to tell himself that Lydia was different, that all those friends made her one of the crowd. (Ng, 2015, p. 110)

Marginalization doesn't only penetrate into Lees' family life, but also extends beyond Lees. Jack is one example. The single parent family makes Jack and his mother Janet unpopular in the community; at school, "he does not eat in the school cafeteria; he does not go to the dances. In class, he sits in the back row" (Ng, 2015, p. 65). Clearly, Jack is isolated both in community and school from the main stream, and this isolation is rooted from another feature of marginalization—insecurity. Jack feels insecure because he is homosexual which he tries best to conceal though being isolated. A small American town in 1970s definitely marks homosexuality with "alien", and Jack must feel the danger of being alien, so "every few weeks a different girl", but "Jack doesn't date; there are no dinners out, no flowers, no boxes of chocolates in the cellophane wrap. ...A week or two later, he stops calling and moves on" (Ng, 2015, p. 64). This dissolute lifestyle helps Jack relieve his anxiety caused by the strong insecurity because of sex orientation.

Marginal Culture

The research of marginal man and marginalization must go to the research of marginal culture, just as ZHANG points out, "the identity and character of marginal man is born in bi-culture or multi-culture" (Ng, 2015, p. 66). *Everything I Never Told You* displays the cultural marginalization in the following three aspects: ethnics, gender and sex orientation.

The story happens in a small American town in 1970s, which witnesses sharp ethnic contradiction. Celeste Ng's parents are scientists emigrating from Hong Kong to America, so as a Chinese American, Celeste Ng frankly admits that her appearance distinguishes herself from others, and that is a very odd experience. In her eyes, being different gives her extra burden and makes her lost, particularly, when she (or other Chinese immigrants) wishfully thinks she belongs to certain community but others don't think so.

Some plots involving racial discrimination in the novel, more or less, are reflected in the author Celeste Ng or her other acquaintance. Neighbor kids fling fireworks into her mailbox or spit to her family members, but more discriminations disguise subtly: white people take it a miracle that those ethnic immigrants speak without accent, so they ask "where are you from? No—where are you truly from?" those questions and it is actually a discrimination as invisible offending. In this circumstance, cross-ethnic marriage is another phenomenon in marginal culture. The ban of cross-marriage was not abolished until 1967 by the Supreme Court in United States. Before that, since 1958 Gallup has taken an investigation about people's attitude to cross-ethnic marriage, and the result shows most Americans didn't hold positive attitude to cross-ethnic marriage for the first time until 1997; the research on attitude to Asian Americans in 2001 showed that 68% white Americans hold negative or very negative attitude to Asian Americans. This ethnic marginalization has been penetrated by Celeste Ng in this novel: when Marilyn insists to marry James, her mother tries every means to dissuade by yelling at Marilyn, "think about your children...Where will you live? You won't fit in anywhere. You'll be sorry for the rest of your life" (Ng, 2015, p. 54).

The cultural marginalization even extends to gender discrimination. In 1970s, Marilyn's dream to be a female doctor is not accepted by American main stream, so Marilyn must suffer from the marginal mentality. One day in a trance, Marilyn goes into the hospital where Janet works, and as soon as she enters, she "noticed: Dr. Kenger, Dr. Gorden, Dr. Mclenahan, Dr. Stone. What had made her think she could be one of them? It seemed as impossible as turning into a tiger" (Ng, 2015, p. 95). However, even Janet who Marilyn envies cannot escape the bondage of marginal culture. She is gossiped by those community members just because she is different from those housewives by doing jobs which conventionally is done only by male. When "Vivian Allen, leaning over the garden fence, had whispered about late shifts, the Wolff boy left to run wild" (Ng, 2015, p. 93), it is not difficult for readers to find that when gender becomes one dimension of marginal culture, not only male takes it for granted, but female is also "self-marginalized" unconsciously.

Conclusion

In this novel, Celeste Ng discusses some serious problems, such as racial discrimination, gender discrimination and identity crisis, with crafty narrating skill and keen perspective, putting macro issues like race, prejudice, identity, gender into a micro family life. Celeste Ng's delicate language and accurate wording penetrate into conflicts between different cultures and times. The particular setting of the story is marked with strong color of marginal culture, in which most characters are "marginal man", experiencing various marginal conditions in family, work, social life and even inner heart.

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