

Practical or Categorical Identity?

James Identity Conflicts in *Everything I Never Told You*

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Celeste Ng's debut novel *Everything I Never Told You* enjoys a high readership both in America and abroad. Since its publication in 2014, most of the studies focus on Lydia's identity crises and the reasons for Lydia's death. However, most studies neglect the fundamental reason of James' identity crisis—the loss of his inner self-identity. James' cognitive denial of his biological identity and his affective alienating from his practical identity cause his contradictory complex toward himself and his children. Thus it becomes one of the main roots of Lydia's death and the whole family's unhappiness. The paper points out that transcending the host country is the best way for an ethnic people living in America.

Keywords: identity conflict, practical, categorial

Introduction

Everything I Never Told You (hereafter referred to as *Everything*), Celeste Ng's debut novel published in 2014, was an instant hit to both Chinese and American readers and critics. The whole story is trying to reveal the mysterious death of Lydia, the beloved middle children in James Lee's family. It was about a Chinese American family living in a small-town Ohio in the 1970s. James Lee, an American-born Chinese, taught American cowboy culture at Middlewood College in Ohio. His wife Marilyn, a blond, blue-eyed American woman, was a physics major student at Redcliffe when he was a teaching assistant at Harvard. They had three mixed-blood children, Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. The seemingly happy and perfect mixed-race Chinese-American model family's life was broken, owing to Lydia's death. The unspeakable wounds and sufferings that every family member carried on, like layers of an onion, were peeling off gradually and exposing to readers.

Since the publication of the novel, the first and foremost discussed topic among literary critics is identity, such as studies on James' or Lydia's identity crisis (Chi, 2018; Shen & Zhai, 2019), on identity reconstruction and identity negotiation of James (Ding, 2020). Then there are ethnic studies, like the disenchantment of the model minority myth (Guo & Wang, 2017). The third group of research is mainly the applications of literary criticisms to investigate theme, character and plot, such as trauma theory, existentialism (Wang, 2017), etc. There are some papers analyzing the psychological and cognitive aspects of the novel, such as Huang Hui hui's

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article “Time, Personality, and Self-schema: *Everything* and the paradigm of Trauma Cognitive Narrative” (Huang, 2019, pp. 89-95), in which she analyzed the novel from three self-schemata: telling, experiencing and reflecting. She regarded that this narrative technique provided “possibilities and means for the characters and readers to reconstruct perceptive and insightful self-schemata” (Huang, 2019, p. 112). Some studies analyze Lydia’s loneliness, a universal human emotion with idiosyncratic personal traits. According to Bino’s analysis, Lydia “never shared her feelings to her parents. Her mind was filled with depression. Due to depression she committed suicide by drowning herself in the lake” (Bino, 2020, p. 397).

The above studies provide a comparatively deep and thorough understanding of the novel. However, since the novel focuses on revealing each member’s untold secrets, James’ psychological and spiritual trauma were the main reason of Lydia’s death. The current research seldom discusses the fundamental reason of James identity crisis, that is, how does the conflicts between his categorical identity and practical identity cause his identity loss and the tragedy of Lydia.

Identity Conflicts in *Everything*

As Haggas argues, “Ng’s emotionally complex debut novel captures the tension between cultures” (Haggas, 2014, p. 13). Contrary to the early Chinese American writers in the 1970s, such as Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, whose focus of writing are on the conflict between Chinese and American cultures and identities, the post-80s Chinese American writer Celeste Ng’s *Everything* renews the immigrant experience, “the conversation is no longer focused on the treatment of assimilation but moves into the psychological shock that transpires after assimilation is achieved” (Abdelsalam, 2020, abstract). *Everything* is an emotive flow of Chinese American’s lives. It is a worthwhile attempt to speak those unspeakable and to achieve the real conversation between different groups of people. The theme of the novel is beyond a single category of ethnic essentialism. These new generation of Chinese American writers “no longer focus on the pursuit of ethnic essentialism, they start to focus on the deep psychology and demands of Chinese American individuals and promote Chinese American literature to the significance level of the universal value of human nature. The Chinese American’s self-seeking has stepped into the multi-exploration road of anti-essentialism” (Gao, 2015, pp. 200-201).

Different from the screaming, shouting, whining, and angry tone in *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, the tone in *Everything* is rather detached, cold and objective, but the suffering, alienation, outrage and hopelessness are shown through characters’ free indirect thought presentation. The shifting perspective from describing external conflicts into revealing inner wounds and scars of Chinese American immigrants will definitely plunge new energy into the world literature. In the meantime, the efforts of initiating dialogue from common human affection, such as love, misunderstanding, longing for recognition will easily arouse empathy and gain support. Just as Willough’s words, “everyone has secrets. Everyone is unknown. To comprehend the depth of each character’s hopes and fears, to understand the breadth of everything never told, one simply must read this intriguing novel!” (Willough, 2016, pp. 122-123).

Non-white Migrants’ American Dream

In the novel, Lee’s family life is a miniature of the whole second-generation Asian American migrants’ life. As a Chinese American immigrant, the descendant of a paper son, James fearfulness of losing American

identity is deeply imprinted on his consciousness. He thinks that the moment he admits his Chinese identity means he will lose his American identity immediately. The initiative discard of Chinese identity is not rare among Chinese Americans. The reasons are quite complicated, but it is said that “seven generations of suppression under legislative racism and euphemized white racist love have left today’s Asian Americans in a state of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration” (Chin, 2019, XXVI). Facing the hegemonic American politics, economy, culture and history, Chinese Americans wish they can be recognized as Americans, and they believe they will gain happiness by their recognition. The extreme American dream leads to their strong willingness to reject their own Chinese identity and resent the Chinese self.

Chinese American’s strong desire of being recognized as Americans by the mainstream American society is not only reflected “in recklessly identifying with the white mainstream culture and values, but also in the extreme behavior of completely excluding national culture and symbols with any trace of national culture” (Lu 2005, p. 51). Muller in his *New Strangers in Paradise* is asking, “what—family, ancestral tradition, religion—should one offer in exchange for the American Dream?” (Muller, 2015, p. 10). James, who grew uncomfortable in his bodies because of the sociopolitical environment that impacted his life and as a result, developed degrees of either guilt or self-hatred toward his Chinese identity. But how to avoid the identity loss, L. K. Hsu in his *The Challenge of the American Dream* gave us the answer a long time ago. He stated that “the Chinese in America, in common with other minority groups, will have a continuing problem of double identity. But the effective way of dealing with it is not to deny its existence but to face it squarely” (Chin, 2019, XXXII).

Categorial and Practical Principles of Identity Construction

The main reason for James strong desire to be accepted by the White American society is the in/out group binary opposition of nationalism. Because James has the biological characteristics of a non-white, he is treated as a marginalized man by the White society. Patrick Colm Hogan, one of the leading American scholar in the field of cognitive narratology, in his monograph *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* (Hogan, 2009) refers nationalism to “any form of in-group identification for a group defined in part by reference to a geographical area along with some form of sovereign government over that area” (Hogan, 2009, p. 4). The notion emphasizes nationalism has been a “complex, hierarchically structured, nonnomadic societies” (Hogan, 2009, p. 4) as well as “it has always followed the cognitive and affective principles of in/out group division” (Hogan, 2009, p. 5). Spying the limitations of previous historical studies of nationalism, Hogan’s research “on the human mind and the human brain suggests that a great deal of our social behavior is shaped by aspects of our cognitive architecture” (Hogan, 2009, pp. 5-6). Thus, analyzing James’s social behavior in the novel can help us fully understand his cognitive and affective architecture as an out-group people.

According to Hogan’s understanding, identity theories tend to combine what people can do into which group they will be included in. It increases the difficulty of analyzing real situations on identity. In fact, the identity formation at the very beginning should draw “a fundamental distinction between categorial and practical identity” (Hogan, 2009, p. 8). In Hogan’s definition, “practical identity is the set of habits, skills, concepts, ideas, and so forth, which allow people to act physically and mentally, most importantly insofar as such action bears on interaction with others” (Hogan, 2009, p. 25). Language, the way people eat, gesture, behavior are all specific examples of practical identity. As to categorial identity, Hogan refers “any group membership that one takes to be

definitive of who one is. It is the way one locates oneself socially—as American, Irish, Catholic, or whatever” (Hogan, 2009, p. 29).

Identity Conflicts for James

Identity, as a self-constructed recognition of oneself in the society, is developed and operated on the axis of the human self. It is mainly around the different axis of gender, age, class, race and country. During the process of identity formation, the categorial identity enforces more than the practical identity. Without any doubt, the in-group people feel more secure, trustworthy, and confident than those out-group people. In contrast, the out-group people will become more and more humiliated, self-despised, and eager to be accepted by the in-group people.

James’ Categorial Identity: An American

One will never be aware that he is different from others, unless they enter into a group of people. Before James went to school, his categorial identity was an American.

That first morning, James slid into his seat and the girl next to him asked, “*What’s wrong with your eyes?*” It wasn’t until he heard **the horror in the teacher’s voice**—“Sherley Byron!”—that he realized **he was supposed to be embarrassed**; the next time it happened, he had learned his lesson and **turned red right away**. In every class, every day that first week, **the other students studied him**: where had he come from, this boy? (Ng, 2014, p. 43)

As a newcomer to the class, James “slid into his seat”. It properly described a kid’s fearfulness and estrangement to a new environment. At that time, James’ own cognition about himself is that he was new to the rest of his classmates. Then a girl’s question, and the teacher’s “horror in the voice” taught him that “he was supposed to be embarrassed”. Although at that time, James has no idea why he should be “embarrassed”, he vaguely knows that he was different from others. That is the first time James experienced identity conflicts brought by categorial identity and practical identity.

For James, a Chinese American, black eyes and yellow skin are his intrinsic properties. These attention-drawing difference made him stand out among those white children. Maybe the girl’s question “what’s wrong with your eyes” is totally out of her curiosity, but the outer appearance is one of the easiest ways for people to categorize people as the in-group or out-group. Naturally, James is the out-group owing to his ethnic properties. As soon as the girl’s question, the “horror in the teacher’s voice” alarmed James that there must be something wrong with the question. Teacher’s “horror” reflected his/her relational knowledge of the Chinese American. At that time, the stereotype of Chinese American is deeply rooted in every white’s mind. The viewing of James’s face must elicit an unfavorable emotional response from the teacher. It was caused by the teacher’s schema, prototypes and exemplar of Chinese American images. For the students, James is a stranger, and strangers always cause fear, which will bring distrust, dislike and alienation. As long as James entering into Lloyd, he was classified into an out-group student by the whites. Then, Americans’ routine cognition is that the in-group member is good and benevolent, and the out-group member is bad and malevolent. Thus, the schoolmates showed a hostile attitude to James.

For James, he was not easily to surrender to his outcast identity, because all the education and cultures in America told him that he is an American. The only thing he can do is to make himself more Americanized. He tried his best to blend in them, and language is the best tool. The literacy education, English as their official

language, helped to foster linguistic exclusion. If one has a high competence in English, it may help him diminish language distance between the in-group members of society effectively. Because the in-group inclusion criteria “expect certain behavioral, linguistic, conceptual, attitudinal, and other continuities within identification groups” (Hogan, 2009, p. 38). Language is “the most obvious and crucial area of practical identity coordination in daily life. ... There is nothing that is more disruptive of shared identification than an inability to communicate” (Hogan, 2009, p. 82). Vaguely knowing language can be one way to show his similarity with the whites, James “stopped speaking Chinese” in the fifth grade. Chinese, a minority language in America, “is devalued and treated with low, inferior status by the society” (Wu, 2005, p. 2387). He was scared to be seen as less American by speaking Chinese language.

James’ Practical Identity: A Chinese

James is a model minority depicted in the textbook. He was graduated from Harvard. Now he is a professor in an American university and forms a multi-racial family. James embodies the image of young successful Chinese American in the United States. He is the one who climbed up the social and economic ladder, regardless of the economic hardships his parents had experienced. However, despite all his achievements, the whole society still treated him as a Chinese and his practical identity was highlighted constantly by his colleagues, neighbors and town’s people. James was quite annoyed by people’s alienation, but he was comforted by thinking that his wife Marilyn treated him as an American.

Thus, when his wife Marilyn accused James of being so humiliated by the American policeman, James anger and dignity reached an ultimate.

From those two syllables—**kowtow**—explode bent-backed coolies on cone hats, pigtailed Chinamen with sandwiched palms. Squinty and servile. Bowing and belittled. (Ng, 2014, p. 116)

The lexical entry “kowtow” triggered James semantic memory for the humiliated, submissive and timid Chinese Americans. It showed that his beloved wife could neither escape from the Chinese’s stereotypical understanding but also showed that the previous marriage foundation between him and his wife was a fake utopia. After James met Marilyn, James expected and believed that Marilyn was different from other whites. In his understanding, Marilyn’s acceptance of him signifies she treats him as a real American instead of a Chinese. However, “kowtow” revealed that Marilyn did not regard him as an American. If there is no room to accept him as an American in his own house, then there will be no place to escape from his Chinese identity.

In Hogan’s study, one’s practical identity involves knowing one’s place in the relevant hierarchy and the places of other people in that hierarchy (2009, 51). Different from Marilyn’s own constructed fairy tales of Lydia, James had a rational view of Lydia’s death. Moreover, James knew that the police’s verdict was true. Lydia was a lonely and unhappy girl. His cooperation with the police became the main reason of Marilyn’s accusation. James humiliated, obedient and docile manner to police was unbearable to Marilyn. James and Marilyn had a clear judgement of their practical identity, but the in-group/out-group division made them have different reactions toward Lydia’s death.

Marilyn’s “being different” in American society is in nature different from James’. Marilyn, an inborn American, was present all the time in America. No matter how excessively she had violated the American social norms, she was still regarded as the in-group member. Her in-group society members would always tolerate her

extreme behavior. However, James ethical difference caused real alienation. He was and will always be regarded as an out-group member of American society. Thus in Chapter Ten, James angrily said to Marilyn that “you have no idea what it’s like, being different” to show his outrage and indignation at his wife’s misunderstanding and to the whole society’s exclusion (Ng 2014, p. 242). It strongly expressed the minor group’s helplessness and hopelessness concerning their categorial identity.

Transcending National Identity

Lydia was a paragon of mixed-race Chinese American, she was the emblem of cultural, national, racial, transnational, racial betwixt, and betweenness. Lydia’s death was not only the outer manifestation of the ethnic problem in the society, but also the inner question of why that can be happened. For James, he blamed himself that he was not a white man, that he should not marry Marilyn, that he was the root of the family’s tragedy. These thoughts tortured James, so that he could not fall asleep, he got nightmares, and could only stop thinking in Louisa’s bed. Louisa’s love affair with James was a very intricate design in the novel, for it was better to regard Louisa as a cultural symbol rather than a character. When one undergoes an identity crisis, it is always his homeland culture that gives him warmth, peace, and a sense of belonging. In James’ eye, Louisa’s care equaled to his longing for a sense of security and belongingness. Before Lydia’s death, James had tried to forget everything related to China. However, culture is not a thing that you can easily forget.

Char siu bau. Louisa beams, and only then does James realize he has spoken aloud. He has not said a word in Chinese in forty years, but he is amazed at how his tongue still curls around their familiar shape. (Ng, 2014, pp. 204-205)

“Char siu bau”, the typical Chinese food, is a daily life element that represents one’s practical and categorial identity. In order to avoid being different from the Americans, James always eats American food. According to Hogan’s study, “sharing food is one of the most fundamental ways of bonding personally. When one does not share food, it may be difficult to form personal bonds across identity divisions” (Hogan, 2009, p. 84). The “sweet”, “tender” and “warm” taste of “char siu bau” made James and Louisa bond with each other deeply. It also symbolized James close tie with his original Chinese culture.

The unsolvable contradiction between his categorial and practical identity is becoming an American in James’ mind and being a Chinese in others’ eyes lays there still. However, the deep-rooted Chinese culture, like another form of blood in James’s body, made James realize that escaping can only result in more and more tragedy — Lydia’s death, Nath’s escaping and Marilyn’s incomprehension and blame. After Lydia’s death and James’ outrages and indignation, he once again felt that he was loved, trusted, and relied upon his wife and children. Embracing into his own Chinese culture, admitting his loneliness, fearfulness, and insecurity, James finally accepted his Chinese identity and tried to face his identity crises with his family members together.

At the end of the novel, James transcends his personal identity crises by paying more attention to his relationships with his wife and children. The whole family, for years after Lydia’s death, “will grope for the words that say what they mean ... There is so much they need to say” (Ng, 2014, p. 283). The mild reconciliation and total confidence in family members form a family affective community. With love, trust and understanding, they can beat any form of prejudices and unfairness in society. As Shen and Xie wrote in their article, “the ending of the novel has a mental fit with Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2006). Both of them express the silence after the

anxiety, the hope after the pain, and the warmth after indifference, which sweeps away the sense of suffocation before” (Shen & Xie, 2017, p. 579).

Conclusion

Using cross-ethnic Lee’s family as a prototypical story, Celeste Ng expresses her hope for the elimination of racial discrimination by arising empathy from all groups of readership. By analyzing James’ cognitive and affective movements toward his way of (re)constructing himself as an American, the paper reveals that if minor ethnic group people confined their cognition to nationalism and in/out group membership, they would never get rid of their identity crises. Even worse, with the generation of more negative emotions caused by their ethnic identity, they will suffer severe psychological and spiritual traumas. Through establishing a human affective community, the Lee’s family has transcended national identity by focusing on family love, trust and understanding. In the meantime, the common affection of love, distrust, dislike, etc. described in the novel transcends the scope of Asian American literature’s cultural conflicts. The theme of calling for equality has a more profound realistic implication with the world’s recent ethnic conflict. Celeste Ng is stepping into the world of world literature by the construction of human affective and aesthetic community.

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