

# Loss of Self-identity—A Comparative Analysis of *Everything I Never Told You* and *The Bluest Eyes*

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As a non-mainstream group with a large proportion in the pluralistic society of the United States, the literary forms of the black and Asian groups have always attracted much attention. *The Bluest Eyes* and *Everything I Never Told You* appeared in different social times and told about different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, they both involved the exclusion of non-mainstream ethnic groups by the mainstream white society and the denial and loss of personal identity of the two different ethnic groups in the face of the mainstream culture. This paper will make a comparative analysis of these two works. By comparing the loss of self-racial identity of the protagonists in the two novels, this paper will make an in-depth discussion of the survival status of African Americans and Asians, and reveal the self-identity loss of black people and Asian people in the mainstream culture. Through comparative analysis, more scholars pay attention to this issue, which is of great practical significance to further understand the literary dynamics of African American and Asian ethnic groups.

**Keywords:** *The Bluest Eyes*, *Everything I Never Told You*, self identity, comparative analysis

## Introduction

The black and Asian groups, as non-mainstream groups with a large proportion in the pluralistic society of the United States, have always received much attention. The research involves many aspects of education, culture, and family conflicts of non-mainstream ethnic groups. Toni Morrison, as the representative figure of American black women literature, *The Bluest Eyes* as her debut, centered on black girl Pecola's crazy pursuit of white people's blue eyes, told a story that racial discrimination and gender discrimination made black people's self-consciousness weak and self-identity denied under the great conflict between white mainstream culture and black culture. Ng Celeste is a new Chinese writer in the 21st century. *Everything I Never Told You*, the novel told a serious story about an individual's racial identity through the struggles of two generations of Asian-Americans facing the alienation of mainstream society.

*The Bluest Eyes* described the unfair treatment of black people in American society in the 1970s, while *Everything I Never Told You* told the story of Asian professors and their mixed-race daughters receiving special attention in America. This paper takes the loss of Asian and black self-identity as the entry point, and compares the similarities and differences of the protagonist's racial identity, family environment, and the ending of the two novels. Through these comparisons, it is fully demonstrated that the United States, as a melting pot, discriminated against and excluded other ethnic groups by the mainstream society during the outbreak of

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immigration. *The Bluest Eye* stems from the author's childhood experience and told the story of a black girl, who experienced the tragic experience of craving for the blue eyes of a pair of whites. The 11-year-old black girl Pecola, because she looked ugly, was not liked by her family, classmates, and neighbors, and her life was very depressed. So she dreamed of having beautiful blue eyes like a white girl, because black girls at that special time generally believed that "blue-eyed blacks are the most beautiful."

However, a beautiful dream has a big contrast with the cruel reality. Not only did she not realize her own wishes, but she was raped by her father. She became pregnant and fell into a more painful abyss. The contradiction between ideal and reality leads to the emergence of tragedy: Pecola's illusion that she really had a pair of very beautiful blue eyes. The most versatile writing technique used in *The Bluest Eye* reveals the tragic fate of a black girl who lost her eyes with blue eyes in the context of ethnic oppression. Through the novel, Morrison tried to awaken her black compatriots. Only by maintaining the self-esteem and self-confidence of their own nation, the entire black nation may survive and develop. Morrison came to outline the tragedy of the blacks who lost themselves under the influence of white culture through vivid metaphors. *Everything I Never Told You* is the debut of Asian woman writer Celeste Ng, which was published at the end of 2014. Set in the America in the 1960s and centered around the death of their second daughter Lydia, the book told the story of a mixed-race family's crisis of identity, gender, family, race, and personal achievement. James was the second generation of Chinese immigrants who was born in America. He had always been eager to be an ordinary person because he could not integrate into the American society with his special identify. Lydia, the daughter of the cross-cultural marriage, grew up with very different expectations from her parents. Lydia's special attention in public is a reflection of America's rejection of outsiders.

This paper, which based on the unique ethnic cultures of blacks and Asians, will compare the ethnic self-identities in *The Bluest Eye* and *Everything I Never Told You*, and explore the alienation of other ethnic groups from the mainstream American society and the lack of ethnic self-identity of blacks and Asians. Through comparative analysis, it would attract much attention of more scholars to this issue, which is of great practical significance to further understand the literary dynamics of African American and Asian American.

### Literature Review

Other expressions of identity include identity and identify. Identity focuses more on a difference, and identify focuses more on identity. Some scholars also believe that identity and self-identity are the determination, approval, and acceptance of one's own relationship in the relationship between people and society. The most remarkable feature of American society is the diversity of race and cultural diversity. There are irreconcilable contradictions and conflicts among ethnic groups from beginning to ethnic groups throughout. In the history of American society, white culture has played an absolute advantage both economically and politically. With the help of the media, white people wantonly promote the values and outlook on life of white culture, which has distorted the black mind and eroded their culture in different forms. Therefore, Morrison, as a representative figure of black American female literature, won the Nobel Prize in Literature after her debut work, *The Bluest Eye*, began to receive critical attention and research. Other expressions of identity are cultural identity, national identity, and other identities. Identity is more about difference. Some scholars believe that "identity" and "self-identity" are the essential characteristics and meaning of life in the relationship between people, people and groups, and people and society. The most prominent feature of American society is racial

diversity and cultural diversity. There are irreconcilable contradictions and conflicts among different ethnic groups from beginning to end (Wang & Hao, 2017, p. 37).

In the history of the American society, the white culture has an absolute advantage both economically and politically. With the help of the media, the white people publicize the white culture and promote the values and outlook on life of the white culture, which distorts the hearts of the black people and erodes their culture in different ideological meanings.

As *Everything I Never Told You*'s author commented:

America was a melting pot, but Congress, terrified that the molten mixture was becoming a shade too yellow, had banned all immigrants from China. Only the children of those already in the States could enter. (Ng, 2014, p. 41)

Although Americans advocate freedom and equality, racial discrimination is still common. According to Zhou Jiaolin's point (Zhou & Wan, 2018, p. 99), pure white Americans hold discriminatory attitudes towards other races due to their own sense of superiority, and the so-called freedom and equality is limited to white Americans.

At the same time, Asian people cannot escape discrimination. Equality under racial discrimination is like the moon in the water. Interracial marriages like James's and Marilyn's in *Everything I Never Told You* are unacceptable, and their mixed-race children find it harder to define themselves in such social Settings.

Chi Jingrui (2018, pp. 92-94) said that as a yellow-skinned and white-heart banana-man, James has been an American with American citizenship, but for more than 40 years in the United States, he was still the other of the society and was not accepted. His heart was extremely self-abased, in order to be able to integrate into the mainstream society, he studied the mainstream culture hard, but still be excluded. As a Chinese, he did not abandon himself to cater to the mainstream culture in the United States, nor did he quietly endure the unfair treatment he was subjected to. He chose to speak for himself, accept his identity as a Chinese, and find his identity in the mainstream society dominated by white people.

However, the blacks are different from the much attention on Asian-Americans, because of the historical roots of racism in the United States, white culture and aesthetic standards have always been ingrained in every corner of society. As Wang Shouren (2004) mentioned, "When the black self identity is not recognized in society, many black people begin to create some white features in themselves to achieve psychological balance." (p. 87)

Gao Jie (2017, p. 92) also believes that in the world dominated by white people, black people have lost themselves, and have been at the bottom of society for a long time. Their political status has been marginalized. They blindly and completely accept white people's aesthetic standards, believing that blond hair and blue eyes are the symbols of beauty, forming the concept of "black is ugly" and the disadvantaged culture of race.

*The Bluest Eyes* indirectly reflected the white American racial discrimination against and oppression of blacks, so that the black will be internalized racism, loss self identity, and believe that the black is ugly, into a confused and lost.

Morrison depicts a series of black souls under the impact of white hegemony. They are alienated in different degrees under the erosion of strong culture, losing their spiritual and themselves in the mainstream white culture.

According to Dai Bojun (2016, p. 590), their blind pursuit of the white culture caused the internalization of racism. On the one hand, it makes the black people become victims, on the other hand, the blacks are eager to

enter into the mainstream society of white rule, but their social status and economic condition refuse them into and have the possibility of split into the embarrassing position.

Under the rule and oppression of the white culture, the survival and development of the black community is particularly important. Only by breaking away from the shackles of spirit and body, and rebuilding self identity and values, can they establish a correct self-identity, construct a reasonable self-identity, and rebuild a brand new and positive image.

### Comparison of Similarities

*Everything I Never Told You* and *The Bluest Eye* are based on the 18th century American society as the background, describing the same problems faced by different ethnic groups in different eras. The loss and negation of self-identity have led to the tragedy of the two protagonists in the ending of the novel. Self-identity, as the basis of self-recognition, largely determines people's recognition of themselves and their culture.

### Particularity of Ethnic Identity

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia's father, James, because of his Chinese identity, was treated specially at Harvard University when he was young.

James is all too familiar with this kind of forgetting. From Lloyd Academy to Harvard to Middlewood, he has felt it every day—that short-lived lull, then the sharp nudge to the ribs that reminded you that you didn't belong. It seemed a false comfort to him, like a zoo animal crouched in its cage, ignoring the gawking eyes, pretending it is still running wild. (Ng, 2014, p. 192)

By comparing animals in the zoo, it can better reflect the special attention which James received at school because of his Chinese identity. So after meeting Marilyn, he decided to move to a town with few people and started their new life. But after their children were born, the townspeople still looked at them differently because of their special identify. In the novel, James argues with his wife, he said:

"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." He feels as if he has vomited, violently, and he drags the back of his hand across his lips. "You have no idea what it's like, being different." (Ng, 2014, p. 239)

The difference that Asian-American identity brought to James was that he didn't fit in with the white population. Fundamentally, their Asian-American mixed-race status has aroused widespread concern among white people around them, and at the same time produced a differential treatment by the mainstream society.

In *The Bluest Eyes*, Pecola's family was black, and most of the people around are black families. But despite this, in a few moments of contact with white people, they were still treated by white discrimination and social unfair treatment. The grocery store owner confessed to her because of Pecoal's black identity, and the surrounding classmates ridiculed her.

But he has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (Morrison, 2002, p. 136)

All of these, the white man's undisguised hatred of the black man show the rejection of the non-mainstream society by the mainstream society in different eras.

Just as Shan Bo's (2016, p. 41) point of view, through the way to find legal motives for their colonial activities, after the collapse of the colonial system, these countries and mainstream society use this tool to confirm their superiority and defend the violation of "the other national", and protect their mainstream status.

### **Lack of Ethnic Identity**

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia's cognition of her identity is greatly negated, which brought her a great deal of harm.

Sometimes you almost forgot: that you didn't look like everyone else. In homeroom or at the drugstore or at the supermarket, you listened to morning announcements or dropped off a roll of film or picked out a carton of eggs and felt like just another someone in the crowd. Sometimes you didn't think about it at all. And then sometimes you noticed the girl across the aisle watching, the pharmacist watching, the checkout boy watching, and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous. Catching the eye like a hook. (Ng, 2014, p. 189)

In fact, Lydia was too concerned about the eyes of others, especially the colored eyes from white people, which brought her negation of self-identity from her thoughts and self-awareness. People were all looking at people by appearance. The colored glasses of the white people were a great pressure on her and always proved that she was different from the people around her. She subconsciously rejected her special ethnic identity and began to renounce herself because she is difficult to integrate into the mainstream society.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's longing admire for blue eyes never stopped. In the face of school violence, she believes that if she had a pair of blue eyes, she could avoid these injuries; when not being welcomed by the surrounding people, she thinks that if she had a pair of blue eyes, she could get everyone's favorite, even when she is pregnant after her father's taint, she still stubbornly believes that if she had a pair of blue eyes, she could recover these tragedies.

Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. (Morrison, 2002, p. 89)

Pecola's fervent prayer for a miracle reflected her frenzied pursuit of whiteness, as well as her extreme self-abasement of her body. These highlighted the negation and rejection of black people themselves under the oppression of mainstream culture. They believe that by pursuing assimilation with mainstream society, they can help them better integrate into society, but the fact is actually opposite. Excessive pursuit of assimilation has caused non-mainstream ethnic groups to lose their recognition and confidence in their own development, and this lack will aggravate the tragedy caused by the loss of personal identity in ethnic development.

With the rapid development of the immigration era, people's pursuit of alien culture reflects the lack of confidence in the own native group of culture at some extents. This lack of confidence in the native culture leads to the denial and loss of personal identity.

With the development of globalization, although the existence and manifestation of "the other image" as the difference between ethnic identity and mainstream culture cannot be avoided, the protagonists of the novel were tortured by the particularity of their ethnic identity, in the process of constructing this image; self-awareness also plays an important role. The loss of self-identity is closely related to self-awareness. It also shows the importance of adhering to cultural independence and self-identity affirmation in the process of loss.

### Comparison of Differences

Lydia and Pecola were representatives of two different ethnic groups. Lydia's self-identity was lost because of excessive self-denial, and most of her negation of self came from the sensitivity of self-consciousness. As a standard of self-identity, it lost the value of her own existence. Pecola's excessive pursuit of identity led to the end of the tragedy, her excessive pursuit essentially came from the ideological oppression and external pressure of the mainstream society. The wrong value orientation instilled in the mainstream society made Pecola's wrong yearning for the physiological characteristics of white people, which led to the ending tragedy.

#### Difference in Ethnic Identity

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia's father, a professor at Harvard University, had received a lot of attention in life and work, but most of these concerns were based on the curiosity and strangeness of mainstream white groups towards Asian ethnic groups, which is more neutral.

"I know how to think for myself, you know. Unlike some people, I don't just kowtow to the police." In the blur of her fury, Marilyn doesn't think twice about what she's said. To James, though, the word rifles from his wife's mouth and lodges deep in his chest. From those two syllables—kowtow—explode bent-backed coolies in cone hats, pigtailed Chinamen with sandwiched palms. Squinty and servile. Bowing and belittled. He has long suspected that everyone sees him this way—Stanley Hewitt, the policemen, the checkout girl at the grocery store. But he had not thought that everyone included Marilyn. (Ng, 2014, p. 113)

In fact, Asians are more inclined to cultural difficulties than the status and oppression of blacks in mainstream society. Therefore, Lydia's "the other" image was based on self-awareness and took the attitude of mainstream society as an auxiliary object. By over-sensing the unfriendly factors in the external environment, she finally portrayed "the other" being marginalized.

According to the survey (Julie, 2014, p. 121), more than half of Asian immigrants in the United States tend to have better careers and development prospects in the United States in recent years. This survey shows that although the Asian ethnic group would receive different views from white people due to differences in identity, the status of identity of the Asian ethnic group itself is not subject to excessive exclusion and alienation. Through their own efforts, the Asian ethnic group can get rid of the characteristics of "the other" image. Some outstanding Asian ethnic groups can even dominate in a certain industry by virtue of their own abilities.

In contrast, in *The Bluest Eye*, however, Pecola's classmate forced Pecola to play with him because of his superiority, and he collapsed everything to Pecola after the accident. Although Pecola tried to explain, no one cares. This reflected the different ethnic group's face different attitudes of mainstream society. "Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them." (Morrison, 2002, p. 58).

The "blue eyes" blindly pursued by Pecola were derived from the wrong value orientation of the mainstream society, and the wrong direction had deepened the loss of self identity. At the same time, the loss of self identity of Pecola was completely established by the discrimination and oppression of the external mainstream society.

In fact, looking back at history, it is not difficult to find that the problem of black Americans has always been a major problem affecting American society. Blacks are part of the colonial activities of the mainstream

society, and they also bear the influence of centuries of slavery on their identity. In the white subconscious, the blacks are taken for granted as an accessory, not worthy of value, and not worthy of fair treatment. This hegemonic consciousness led to the oppression of the black ethnic groups in the mainstream society, which made the black ethnicity go further and further in the path of self-identity loss and negation, thus creating a tragedy similar to the novel.

Therefore, the process of the loss of Pecola's self identity was passive and objective; the process of the loss of Lydia's self identity was active and subjective.

### **Difference in Family Structure**

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia's family environment was excellent. Her father, James, graduated from Harvard University when he was young. Her mother, Marilyn, had been trying to achieve her better life value despite dropping out of Harvard University. So they created a relatively superior family environment for Lydia.

Once, a receptionist at the provost's office thought he was a visiting diplomat from Japan and asked him about his flight from Tokyo. He enjoys the surprise on people's faces when he tells them he's a professor of American history. "Well, I am American," he says when people blink, a barb of defensiveness in his tone. (Ng, 2014, p. 9)

Therefore, in the self-identity, although James and Lydia may be affected by the excessive attention from the outside world, they cannot affect their career and academic pursuit. Her parents' love also made up for what Lydia lacked in her pursuit of self-identity.

However, Pecola's family environment was just the opposite. Her parents were pure blacks, and they had experienced many hardships because of their black status in the process of growing up, so they had a great dislike of Pecola's black identity. The formal disgust led to the constant occurrence of family tragedies.

In the novel, her mother was too much to love the children of the white employer's family, and even when she was in danger, she scolded Pecola for the first time and comforted the employer's little girl.

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. "Hush baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." She went to the sink and turned tap water on a fresh towel. Over her shoulder she spit out words to us like rotten pieces of apple. "Pick up that wash and get on out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up." Pecola picked up the laundry bag, heavy with wet clothes, and we stepped hurriedly out the door. As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl. (Morrison, 2002, p. 107)

The contrast between her mother's doting on white children and her aversion to Pecora reflects her mother's evasion of her child's black identity. As a mother, she did not direct her children in the right way, but was full of hatred and indifference. And her father thought that Pecola's black skin brought pain to her life, so he ended her daughter's suffering by raping Pecola. Because of the malformed parents' concept, it has promoted the loss of Pecola's self-identity.

In the novel, the Claudia sisters who are closely related to Pecola, although their family conditions were not much different from Pecola, their family relationship was warm and harmonious. They did not have a denial of self-identity and an excessive pursuit of white symbols.

It is the difference in the atmosphere of two different ethnic families that has brought a world of difference to the fate of the two girls. Loss and denial of personal identity are not determined by a specific factor. In the personal growth experience, the family atmosphere plays an important role in shaping the personal identity. In

*Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia's negation tended to negate herself. Her Asian identity is only part of the negation. In contrast, in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola tended to completely negate her identity. She insisted that her identity brings all the paths she has encountered, and that whenever she had the opportunity to change her identity, she could change the tragedy she has suffered.

### **Difference in the Ending of Novel**

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia jumped into the lake and she ended up losing her life in the most decisive way. Lydia made a new promise on the dock. This time, she promised herself, she will start again. After Lydia left, her family began to get back on track. "He will think of her often. When their father, one day, enters a party and for the first time does not glance, quickly, at all the blond heads in the room." (Ng, 2014, p. 287).

Her departure made her father understand that it was not a good thing to care too much about others. At the expense of her life, Lydia exchanged for the salvation of the whole family. Her departure saved their family and brought new life and hope to their families.

However, Pecola was not so lucky. After encountering her father's defilement, Pecola's mother thought that it was Pecola's mistake and drove her out of the house, and even more unfortunately, Pecola had her father's child. After these tragedies, Pecola always insisted on her longing admire for blue eyes, and finally she rushed and began to imagine that she have her own blue eyes.

My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again. See how pretty they are. Yes. They get prettier each time I look at them. They are the prettiest I've ever seen. So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment. (Morrison, 2002, p. 168)

The results show that the character images, behaviors, and language styles in the novel, Pecola's obsession with blue eyes didn't diminish even after she went mad, and she even had the illusion that she already had blue eyes. Although the endings of the two novels ended in tragedy, in *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia exchanged her tragedy for the salvation of the people around her, and she brought rebirth and redemption to her family. But in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's tragedy was the real tragedy. While she is unconscious, she still made the bluest eyes as her goal. The negation of self-identity and the excessive pursuit of white features were doomed to her tragedy.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of this paper is to analyze the loss of the survival status of the black and Asian Americans and discuss the survival status of the black and Asian Americans, which is meaningful to further understand the literary dynamics of the black and Asian Americans. Black and Asian groups, as a large proportion of non-mainstream groups in the United States, have been attracting attention. The study involves the education, culture, family conflicts, and many other aspects of the non-mainstream ethnic groups. Although these two works appear in different era societies and tell different ethnic cultural backgrounds, they equally involve the rejection of mainstream white society of non-mainstream ethnic groups and the denial and loss of personal identity of two different ethnic groups in the face of mainstream culture.

With the development of globalization, the rise of immigration has brought about the problem of integration and communication between different ethnic groups. From the colonial culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the wave of Asian immigrants followed in the 19th century, and the refugee crisis in the 21st century, ethnic cultural integration, and exchange has become more and more important.



While adhering to the tradition of the natives, people reject the influence and intervention of foreign ethnic groups. As Shan Bo (2016, p. 44) said, the people of native ethnic group are afraid of foreigners' threats to their own lifestyles and cultural traditions, so they distinguish them from the other, and thus protect their own nation. This kind of hegemonic thinking has brought a great pressure to the self-identity perception of foreign ethnic groups, which makes them excessively pursue assimilation with the mainstream society when constructing their own identity. While ignoring their identity, affirmation will eventually lead to tragedy. It is not difficult to find out the history that Black literature and Asian literature which are as new literature, are emerging literary directions. Since the beginning of development, there have been many non-mainstream ethnic groups who will eventually lose their identity or people who lack self-identity. This is not only a trend, but also a warning.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, with the acceleration of globalization, the exchanges and enthusiasm among ethnic groups have become more frequent. The common development of cultural and ethnic integration is an inevitable trend of globalization. But under this trend, any excessive behaviors may lead to tragedies in similar novels. Therefore, we must grasp the general trend of globalization. On the one hand, as the mainstream society, people should control social value orientation. While keeping their own cultural traditions, they should learn to cooperate and exchange from other ethnic groups. Non-mainstream ethnicity does not necessarily pose a threat, and they are not affiliated with a particular ethnic group. Only by respecting other races and seeking cooperation and unity can people win better development. On the other hand, as the non-mainstream ethnic group, although there are many unavoidable objective factors in the development of integration with mainstream society, such as the family environment and external pressure. However, people must adhere to the affirmation of their own nationality and personal identity. Only by maintaining a correct understanding of their own identity and appropriate value orientation can they promote personal development, form a good mentality, and contribute to the prosperity and development of society. With the awakening of black political power and the deepening of cultural relativism, many black people began to face up to their own culture, and American society expanded the inclusive cultural factors for black people, which is conducive to the identification of black cultural identity.

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