

# ***Alienation of Intergenerational Relationship in Everything I Never Told You***

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**Abstract:** *Everything I Never Told You*, the debut novel of Chinese American writer Celeste Ng, depicts the tragedy of a mixed-race family and subtly connects the intergenerational relationship with the reality of American society. In the Lee family, the parents' unbalanced love in family education makes the intergenerational relationship grow into a state of alienation, full of estrangement and indifference—sincere communication, which favored Lydia, neglected Nath, and invisible Hannah all lack with their parents, is replaced by silence, concealment and dishonesty. Furthermore, James, a Chinese American longing for acceptance in the white society, and Marilyn, a white female who is unable to achieve her ambition, place their dreams on their eldest daughter Lydia, making the parent-child relationship abnormally dependent on the child's self-sacrifice. Thus it reveals that parents' failures in search of self-identities have done irreparable harm to their children's growth and that their lack of family responsibility has also impacted the family model. Therefore, the novel indicates that family members need to strengthen sincere communication between generations and each should assume family responsibilities, so as to resolve family and ethnic conflicts with love and return to a normal life path.

## **1. Introduction**

Celeste Ng (1980- ), a contemporary Chinese American writer and novelist, has published three novels and many short stories in a variety of literary journals. *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng's debut novel published in 2014, has been critically acclaimed by critics. This book, which the Los Angeles Times calls an "excellent first novel about family, love, and ambition" <sup>[4]</sup>, won "Amazon's Book of the Year Award" and "New York Times Notable Book" in the same year. *Everything I Never Told You* depicts a tragedy of a mixed-race family in which father James and mother Marilyn put overwhelming expectations on their daughter Lydia in the name of love but ultimately led to her suicide. Everyone in this mixed-race family is detached from their family members. Family relationships, especially the relationship between parents and children, are alienated. They all withhold their true feelings that cannot be discovered by others, and communication and honesty can hardly be found in such a family. Moreover, Ng subtly connects the intergenerational relationship with the reality of American society in this novel.

This paper analyzes *Everything I Never Told You* in terms of the alienation of the intergenerational relationship and is divided into three parts. The first part mentions the lack of sincere communication but the existence of endless concealment and silence in this interracial

family. The second part analyzes the formation of family relationships dominated by parents' demands and discusses the abnormal intergenerational relationship. The third part explores how conflicts between family and society widen the intergenerational distance and the impact of family irresponsibility on the development of the intergenerational relationship. Through this family misfortune, Ng shows us the connection between the intergenerational ethical relationship and social conflicts, and the significance of enhancing sincere communication and family responsibilities between generations is revealed.

## 2. Estrangement: Inability of Proper Connection

A state of indifference kills a relationship. The intergenerational relationship is normally the closest one among human relationships. In a family filled with apathy, everyone tends to detach from their families. Nobody is willing to express themselves to other family members. Even sometimes, they tell lies to disguise their true feelings and emotions. In this interracial family, their disconnection is mainly demonstrated in two aspects: lack of honesty and absence of love.

As the title of this novel reveals, everyone bears his or her secret mind that other family members can not discover. Children conceal the truth, while parents withhold and misrepresent their children's true feelings. James and Marilyn, though they loved their parents, had difficulty communicating their inner torments to their parents due to different backgrounds and experiences. Therefore, they finally chose not to vent their thoughts honestly. James, a child of the first-generation immigrants in America, was unable to be accepted into the white society. He had no friends and was even bullied at school. To escape the humiliation that others inflicted on him, he tried to reduce meetings and communication with his parents. And Marilyn grew up knowing that her mother wanted her to be a perfect housewife. As a new woman, she was fed up with it and aspired to be a doctor. Nevertheless, Marilyn didn't share her true feelings with her mother, who couldn't show her understanding as a traditional housewife all her life. Therefore, Marilyn only vented her inner discontent by studying hard towards her aim alone. Among the next generation in the Lee family, dishonesty continues. Lydia, the second daughter, was the core of the family. For James, Lydia was a symbol of getting rid of his dilemma as a Chinese American in the white society. For Marilyn, Lydia could realize her dream of becoming a female doctor. Not until Lydia's disappearance did her family realize their little understanding of her life for Lydia didn't express her true feelings and wishes over years. At the same time, her parents projected their thoughts on her life and they misinterpreted her feelings and emotions. Lydia was always a wonderful daughter in their minds. Marilyn thought her daughter had excellent grades and urged her to be a passionate scientist, and James believed she had high popularity and had many close friends in school. Eventually, their thoughts proved untrue.

Moreover, a healthy intergenerational relationship depends on a benign family model. "Emotional neglect can be characterized as cold or critical parenting and denotes a parent intentionally or unintentionally overlooking the signs that a child needs comfort or attention and ignoring its emotional needs"<sup>[3]</sup>. That is to say, there should be a balance in the family and every family member needs to have a clear positioning of their roles. Husbands, wives, fathers, mothers and children should all perform their respective duties. Any excessive preference naturally leads to the absence of love elsewhere, then a family will face unbalancing: people who are ignored would feel lonely, and people who get too much attention would feel overwhelmed. This unbalanced relationship no doubt affects emotional connections among family members. "Parental expectations are harmful when they are not based in our attunement to our children"<sup>[1]</sup>. When parents' love was given to only one child, other children who lack parental care and family warmth may probably experience a feeling of loneliness and abandonment. Both Nath and Hannah are victims of the

absence of parental love. Nath grew up in an environment lack of parental care. He lost his father's love and couldn't get his mother's love. Hannah was eluded from her parents' attention and care. This absence of parents' love eventually led to an indifferent distance between children and parents. Their cold attitudes prevent the necessary communication with their children, and this is how estrangement and alienation happen.

### 3. Grotesque: Abnormal Parent-child Relationships

The Lee family in *Everything I Never Told You* is dominated by the parents' demands. Parents blindly output their values and push their children to grow up in the direction they expect. And children tend to oppress their interests and ideas to accommodate their parents. In this regard, this relationship gradually deviates from a normal state. The family relationship in the Lee family is grounded in the adults' interests. James and Marilyn's so-called education for better integrating their children into society is actually a manifestation of their own selfish needs. Their love becomes grotesque, viewing their children, consciously or unconsciously, as a tool to fulfill their unrealized dreams. Marilyn projected her ambitions and expectations onto her second daughter, Lydia. When she met James, Marilyn, as an outstanding undergraduate destined for medical school, faced a promising future. However, her hope of being a doctor was dashed by marriage and motherhood. After having two children, she felt this life was like a pool of stagnant water, stable but suffocating. Marilyn no longer wanted to spend all her time with her family, husband, and children. Therefore, she decided to run away to Toledo to restart her education and pursued a different life. Unfortunately, she was tricked by life once more: she found herself pregnant. Her dream was disillusioned again. Nevertheless, Marilyn's discovery that Lydia had discarded her cookbook gave her a glimmer of hope and comfort. Since then, Marilyn began to impose her dream of being a doctor on Lydia. Immediately afterward, she devoted all her time and energy to tutoring Lydia in her homework, earnestly teaching five-year-old Lydia arithmetic, buying her *The Science of Air*, *Why There Is Weather* and *Fun with Chemistry* and reading them to her every day before bed, taking Lydia to museums to observe mannequins, and scrupulously examined her homework every day. Marilyn desperately wanted Lydia to become a female doctor, completely ignoring Lydia's needs for private space and normal social interaction. She even indulged in fantasizing about Lydia's future. Marilyn's strong expectations for Lydia put a lot of pressure on her. Finally, Lydia, who was not interested in biology and physics at all, was completely overwhelmed by the red fifty-five at the top of her physics test paper. Parents' limiting children's independent development with their authoritarian love would leave children in a state of dependency for a long time and prevent them from achieving healthy development.

In such a family dominated by parental demands, children who can fulfill their parents' conscious or unconscious wishes are considered as good, while any expression of their desires that go against those of their parents would be viewed as inconsiderate. A child brought up this way, if he is unwilling to lose his parents' love, he must learn to share, give, make sacrifices, and do what he may not want at all. In order not to lose Marilyn's love, Lydia gave priority to taking care of her mother's needs. For Lydia, her mother's wishes were even more important than her true feelings and personal needs. Marilyn's disappearance had a huge impact on the family, especially Lydia. For Nath and Lydia, "Their mother's absence gnawed at them quietly, a dull and spreading hurt" <sup>[2]</sup>. In the days when Marilyn escaped from home, Lydia began to dream terrible things and whenever she woke up from the nightmare, she could no longer sleep. Lydia even associated her mother's disappearance with death. A six-year-old child as she was, her mother's sudden disappearance has imposed an indelible trauma on this fragile individual. "It's not your fault, her father had said, but Lydia knew it was. They'd done something wrong, she and Nath" <sup>[2]</sup>. This event made Lydia

struggle to find a way to vent her loneliness and sadness. There was only one thing in the house that could remind Lydia of her mother—the big cookbook with the red cover. Looking at the book, whose pages showed the trace of her mother’s crying, young Lydia believed that it was she and her brother who did something wrong to make her mother run away from home. She would get her mother back at any cost. “She would do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted” [2].

Admittedly, the growth of any child is inseparable from the nourishment of family affection, and childhood strongly affects the formation of personal personality. Later, Marilyn’s return and expectations for Lydia changed Lydia’s life paths and shaped her personality. The trauma constantly reminded Lydia to be a good daughter, which means she was required to suppress her true nature. Even when facing hateful demands, Lydia chose to accept them to make her mother happy. She knew what her mother expected of her, and as long as she could keep Marilyn home, she was willing to suppress herself. But this behavior is wrong. When a child is repressed by an adult, he cannot develop and grow. For children, their self-awareness gradually develops with age, but if their basic security feels threatened, then their self-awareness will also be threatened. As a result, they lose themselves and become very compulsive about their childhood, controlling and forcing themselves to achieve things they dislike. And the childhood sadness will be interpreted as an existential pain from which they can’t escape. Due to the short-term lack of maternal love in childhood, Lydia’s ability to recognize and express herself was greatly affected. At the same time, it became hard for her to grow into an individual with a healthy psychology and have a normal relationship with her parents.

#### 4. Causes of Alienation in Different Generations

As a mixed-race family, causes behind the intergenerational problems are complex. James and Marilyn’s failures in search of their social identities may be the key to our analysis of the causes behind their alienation from their children. In addition, their absence of family responsibilities is also attributed to an internal factor resulting in this alienation.

The story in *Everything I Never Told You* is set in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, an era with its particularity. Ideological trends such as racism and feminism were prevalent, affecting every social member. James and Marilyn were both marginal figures in the white society and the man-dominated society respectively, and their anxiety over a perceived loss of social identity has imposed great influences on their psychology and inner feelings, thus hurting their relationships with their spouse and with their children. James, as a second-generation immigrant in the United States, was classified as the “other” in the white society. James is a victim of racism, a time-honored phenomenon accompanied by the emergence of colonialism and imperialism. Throughout his life, James was forced to grow up in exclusion, suffering others’ teasing and ridicule. From the school time on, James had realized his differences from these white kids. James’ schoolmates were curious about him. His classmate maliciously made fun of him. Passers-by looked at him undisguised and shouted insulting remarks. Society always reminded him of his identity as an outsider. Nevertheless, James always tried to draw a clear boundary between his racial identity and social identity. He did a series of things to tell himself apart from his Chinese origin. He never let his parents pick him up from school and avoided speaking in Chinese. He made great efforts to do the same as his classmates did, listening to the radio, watching movies, and playing card games. He tried hard to become a “typical American”. This mentality also led to his marriage with Marilyn, a white woman, which meant a symbol of his being accepted by the white society to him. James imposed this mentality and unfulfilled dreams on his children. His extreme expectations of his children to blend into the mainstream white society made him ignore other necessary needs of his

children in the growing period. The children could not get care and comfort from their father, only their parents' strong expectations shouting in the house to push them to grow in one wished direction. Their basic needs cannot be satisfied, and this is how estrangement and alienation happen.

On the other hand, as children's first teachers, parents should play an exemplary role to assume family responsibilities. Their education is the nutrition of their children's growth. Therefore, it is their duty to communicate more with their children to help them enhance harmonious family views, and parents should also fulfill their responsibilities, show their care and understanding, and establish a healthy communicating mode so as to create a good family atmosphere for their children. Neither James nor Marilyn fulfilled their due responsibilities as parents. On the one hand, they should have been obliged to show their care and understanding of their children's thoughts, instead of taking misunderstandings for granted. On the other hand, they couldn't treat their three children equally. Their excessive attention to Lydia inevitably led to Nath and Hannah being left out. James, always evading his duties, failed to fulfill his responsibilities as a father. When James realized his mistake had greatly hurt Nath, he did not have the courage to admit his fault and just pretended nothing happened. This results in irreparable pain for Nath and destroyed their close relationship. And Hannah, before Lydia's accident, had little contact with her parents in daily life. Only after Lydia's death did James communicate with Hannah in order to learn about Marilyn's daily life. James was a failed father though he always tried to be a good one: he worried about his son who was unable to deal with his inner anxiety, cared about his second daughter's interpersonal ability, and cautiously sought information from his youngest daughter. However, he did not dare to shoulder the responsibility of being a father: he failed to comfort his emotionally traumatized son, discover Lydia's loss at the moment of her accepting the gift, and make up for Hannah's lost paternal love. And Marilyn focused on cultivating Lydia, ignoring Nath and Hannah, who also needed care. The whole family got used to Marilyn's preference for Lydia. Though Nath never complained superficially, he was very jealous of Lydia being favored by their parents. He even pushed Lydia into the water, causing her to nearly drown. The impact of parents' irresponsible behavior on family relations had begun to emerge. As for Hannah, her appearance hindered Marilyn from pursuing her goal. From the beginning, Hannah lacked a sense of existence and failed to get the attention of her parents. Eventually, the parents' ignorance made the child the marginal one in their family, and the child learned to suppress her nature and be excessively cautious of the parents' attitude. Parents who do not have family responsibilities will naturally not obtain their children's return to parents. For the Lee family, Lydia's death was the most serious consequence of their irresponsibility. By the time they realized the problem, it was too late. All in all, parents' irresponsible behaviors toward the family hurt both children's psychology and the relationship between generations.

## 5. Conclusions

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng resides her reflections on society in this family tragedy, thematically exploring alienation, loneliness and unfulfilled dreams. In this mixed-race family, the intergenerational relationship, mainly between apathetic father and neglected son, as well as between ambitious mother and favored daughter, alienates into a state of estrangement and abnormality. For one thing, different generations couldn't establish proper connections with each other. Silence, miscommunication and dishonesty are present between the elders and the young. Their estrangement, indifference and absence of love gradually result in the detachment and make family relationship deviate from a normal one. For another, parents view their children as tools to achieve their unfulfilled dreams. And children, in order to keep their parents' love, tend to oppress their true feelings and demands. As an interracial family, the causes behind their intergenerational

problems not only share common features of the generational gap but is also considerably affected by social and cultural factors. External causes such as the particular social context and east-west cultural conflicts, together with internal ones, mainly the parental irresponsibility, hurt the intergenerational relationship and finally lead to this family misfortune. Therefore, in the intergenerational relationship, different generations should care for each other and take family responsibility based on mutual understanding and respect. And parents should play an exemplary role to enhance sincere intergenerational connections, which can function as a practical way to avoid their alienation from their children and reconcile conflicts between society and family.

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