



**Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*: A Study of the
Dichotomy between the Chinese and the Western Family Teleology**
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Abstract

Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* delves into the emotional struggles of a mixed-race family, highlighting feelings of alienation, frustration, and depression rooted in flawed family dynamics. The article critically examines the novel's ethical dilemmas through the dynamics of marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships. James' emotional detachment from his children and Marilyn's overwhelming expectations on Lydia contribute to her psychological distress and eventual tragic death. Additionally, Ng illustrates how parental pressure, and the emotional neglect faced among siblings create emotional distance and disrupt family bonds. Through this depiction, Ng emphasises the vital role of a strong family structure in shaping an individual's identity and mental stability.

Keywords: Mixed-race family, Family dynamics, Parental pressure, Emotional neglect, Identity formation.

Family bonds refer to the emotional connections and relationships that tie family members together. These bonds are often formed through shared experiences, love, support, and a sense of belonging. Family bonds can be built among parents and children, siblings, extended family, and others who are considered as their family. These connections are important for emotional well-being, offering comfort, care, and security in times of need. In *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng explores the shattered family ethics of the Lee family, whose members are torn apart by secrets, unspoken expectations, and racial tensions. Lydia's tragic death exposes the deeper struggles within the family issues of identity, the weight of unrealised dreams, and the consequences of neglecting the emotional needs of each member. Through their broken bonds, Ng illustrates how the American Dream can both shape and destroy a family, highlighting the

complexities of race, ambition, and love in the pursuit of happiness.

In the early 20th century, America was still affected by the Chinese Exclusion Law. James' father came to California using a false name, like many other Chinese immigrants at the time. Because of this, most Chinese immigrants felt nervous all the time, afraid that someone might find out that they had entered the country illegally and that they could be sent back to China. They tried their best to blend into American society and hoped to disappear in the crowd. James was the first Eastern student to attend Lloyd (43). His classmates were curious about this Eastern boy and talked about him behind his back. This made him uncomfortable, and he started pretending to be just like everyone else.

The extra attention on James made him sensitive and feel bad about himself. When James fell in love with Marilyn and lived together before marriage, he felt like America had finally accepted him because Marilyn accepted him. Marilyn seemed like a lifeline to him, as he was overwhelmed with insecurity. Before they married, Marilyn only knew that James' parents had been gone for years. James never told her how his parents came to America or how his family had lived there. This was because economic independence does not completely represent racial equality and cultural identity (435). He was afraid to tell her the truth because he knew that once he told her the facts, his image would be shattered.

Chinese traditional family ethics say that men should take care of social matters, while women should handle things at home. According to these traditional views, a wife should stay at home and deal with the daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and washing. If a woman works outside the home, her husband might feel ashamed. James knew his wife wanted to be a doctor, but he persuaded Marilyn not to think about working when his colleagues invited her to be an assistant. He did this because he knew people would gossip. To protect his dignity as a man, he wouldn't let Marilyn go to work and mention the issue again.

After Lydia's death, James ordered the police to send Lydia's autopsy report to his office instead of his home. He refused Marilyn's request to see Lydia

one last time. All of his actions showed male chauvinism, which came from the belief from the traditional Chinese family ethics that men are superior to women. James stubbornly stuck to his views, and he never considered Marilyn's wishes, and in his mind, she was just a housewife. In the end, his male chauvinism and lack of communication in the marriage made family conflicts worse and became an emotional barrier.

Mrs. Walker was a home-economics teacher at Radcliffe and had been teaching the course for almost twelve years. She strongly believed that women should live as women. Women should be good at housework and always look dressed up when their husbands arrive home. But Marilyn didn't agree with her; she didn't want to be a housewife or a nurse, she wanted to be a doctor. She completed her physics and chemistry courses perfectly and refused to take the home-economics course.

In the 20th century, with the rise of the feminist movement, Marilyn gained the right to an education, bringing her closer to her dream of becoming a doctor. However, women still face pressure and discrimination in work and education, and society did not fully accept women's roles in all areas of life. Marilyn imagined that she could balance a career and family. Then she met Dr Woolf, who lived at the end of the street, and thought she could be a female doctor like Dr Woolf. To achieve her dream and self-worth, Marilyn decided to leave her husband and children. She didn't expect support from her husband and relied on her own efforts. This seems admirable to others, but once she became used to fighting alone, she grew more selfish. This is a typical example of individualism. In the end, however, due to her children's attachment, her moral conscience, and her responsibility to her family, the pregnant Marilyn had to face reality, and her dream was shattered at the same time.

Louisa was the first Oriental student James had ever met, and she looked like his favourite daughter, Lydia. In the fall semester, Louisa became an assistant professor to James. From her, we see the typical qualities of an Oriental woman:

gentleness, tenderness, and submission. When James complained about his hard work, she comforted him by saying, “Your life is not wasted.” When James put his hand over her shoulder, she immediately blushed (11). At that time, she liked James. When James saw his daughter’s autopsy report with no hope, Louisa invited him to her home, specifically to her bedroom. From that point on, they began an illicit relationship. James told her, “You’re the kind of girl I should have married” (205). Louisa began to imagine that James would divorce Marilyn and marry her. When Marilyn found out, Louisa panicked but still told herself it was just a coincidence. In the end, James simply said goodbye to end their relationship.

Love is an ethical relationship with emotional tension and significance in human relationships. Society supports proper love, which is a right for single youth or widowed elderly people, and it should be supported in all aspects. Modern love is based on mutual love. However, James only sought an outlet for his feelings and didn’t want to divorce Marilyn to marry Louisa. On the other hand, Louisa dreamed of marrying him, so their relationship was unequal and abnormal from the start. They only cared about satisfying their own desires and didn’t think about their moral responsibilities or future. A love that destroys other families should not exist.

Rousseau said that the most Important female quality is a gentle, docile personality (284). Lydia was both fortunate and unfortunate. The fortunate part was that she inherited her mother Marilyn’s physical traits perfectly, which made Marilyn favour Lydia. It seemed like Lydia was a precious jewel to Marilyn, but this preference also led to Lydia’s downfall. Marilyn once left her family to chase her dream of becoming a doctor, and young Lydia thought she must have done something wrong, which made her mother angry enough to leave. So, Lydia secretly promised herself to meet all of her mother’s wishes, hoping that it would keep Marilyn from leaving.

Marilyn didn’t fulfil her dream but instead started planning her own life by

imposing her dreams onto Lydia. She would ask Lydia questions from Maths subject at any time, and the yearly birthday gift was always a science book. When Lydia went into the kitchen, Marilyn would think that there was something she didn't know, and she wouldn't be happy about Lydia being in the kitchen. When Lydia's grades began to drop, Marilyn only scolded her and never gave Lydia a chance to explain. Eventually, Marilyn found condoms and cigarettes in Lydia's bag and began to doubt if she really understood her daughter. In reality, Marilyn had been imposing her own requirements on Lydia without truly understanding her. On the other hand, Lydia spent her days carefully, counting how many hugs her mother gave her and how many words she said. Every night, Lydia would check if she would see her mother the next day, and Lydia always answered "yes, yes, yes." These "yeses" reflected the constant tasks and wishes her mother expressed. Over time, the adolescent Lydia realised that the only option for her was to become a doctor. Maybe because of her mother's pressure or because she wanted to escape, Lydia eventually chose the most extreme way to escape, suicide.

Family teleology is about maintaining family harmony and peace. Lydia, wanting to make sure Marilyn wouldn't leave again, tried to meet all of Marilyn's expectations. This was a moral action based on family ethics, a conscious, voluntary, and self-chosen behaviour. Lydia represented the family's will and, as the centre of the family, she felt responsible for fulfilling her parents' dreams and maintaining family harmony. People are social beings with the ability to think, make decisions, and take actions (317). When Lydia was young, her parents controlled everything about her. As she grew older, her personality matured, and her desire for independence increased (246). She wanted her parents to see her as an independent person. Marilyn should have communicated with Lydia but never compromised on her dream of becoming a doctor.

The conflicts between Marilyn and Lydia were mainly in two areas. First, Marilyn wanted Lydia to become a doctor, but when Lydia grew up, she found that science was difficult for her and wanted to quit. They couldn't communicate well

about this, and Lydia faced two extreme choices in her mind: to continue her education or to escape all the pressures. Clearly, Lydia wanted freedom. Second, as a child grows up, it becomes independent with self awareness. If parents continue to control every aspect of their child's future, it causes sharp value conflicts within the child. Marilyn didn't realise that Lydia had grown up, refused to communicate with her, and this ultimately led to Lydia's suicide. James was very much concerned about his daughter Lydia's manners. When the police asked for pictures of Lydia, he carefully selected them. It seemed like he cared about her manners, but in reality, he was focused on how others saw her. After the police started investigating, James noticed that Lydia hadn't called her friends for a long time. Lydia had done something wrong and had lied to her parents. She assumed herself as a door to make her own choices open.

Lydia believed that her father was different from her mother and thought he would understand her, like her brother Nath did. That year, she was excited about the Christmas gift her father would choose for her. But when she opened it, she found a book called *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. James thought Lydia might need this book to help her with relationships, but for Lydia, it felt like an insult. She guessed that her father might have struggled with friendships when he was younger. So, she pretended to appreciate the gift and said nothing. James had often encouraged her to make friends and go on dates, hoping she would have many friends to fix what he saw as his own childhood flaws.

James kept reminding Lydia how love and friendship are important in one's life. He urged her to spend time with her friends and even gave her a book to help her make friends. But in the end, all of his actions led to Lydia's suicide. If he had communicated with Lydia more and understood her emotions, she might not have taken her own life. James was a good father in that he provided a decent home for his family, but he also failed because his actions indirectly led to his daughter's death.

Chinese traditional family stress that men are seen as more important than

women. Nath was the only male child in his family. James pushed him to learn swimming and to play games with other boys at school. But the other boys were not friendly; they made fun of Nath, which made him feel ashamed. However, James just wanted to push Nath to be a better man. Nath was too “thin” to join the rugby team, too “short” to play basketball, and too “foolish” to play baseball. The only way he could make friends was by reading, researching maps, and using a telescope (92). This made James feel deeply disappointed.

Nath was not the son he had hoped for. When Nath accidentally got interested in astronomy, he became obsessed with it and talked about it every day with his father. But James slapped Nath because he thought astronomy was not important, and he never brought it up again. Even when Nath received an offer to Harvard, James looked at him sadly. Although James had lived in the United States for a long time, his ideas were still influenced by Confucianism. According to Confucian family ethics, children have a duty to support their parents and must respect them. The ideal son in James’ mind was one who was both intellectual and strong. So, he forced Nath to learn swimming, join the rugby team, and play with other boys, but none of this worked because of Nath’s physical limitations.

Over time, James became more disappointed with Nath and began to dislike him. As a father, James’ responsibility was not just to provide for his children, but also to raise them emotionally and mentally strong, which is called paternal love. James wanted a son who could obey him, become like him, and even surpass him. His son should meet all his expectations, like many Chinese children are expected to do. But Nath was born in America and grew up with Western education. Western family focus on individualism, so Nath silently chased his dream of astronomy while his father remained indifferent. Nath was accepted into Harvard, a place his parents had dreamed of, but they didn’t pay attention to his success. All he wanted was his father’s approval, but he didn’t get it. James should have encouraged him to follow his dream and shared his experiences to help him, which would have brought the family closer. Their relationship shows the conflict

between the Chinese and the Western family teleology.

Nath was the only one who could give Lydia the warmth of family. As an older brother, he gave a lot of warmth, both as family and as a friend. This warmth made Lydia want to keep going. After Lydia found out her brother would go to Harvard, she hid his admission letter and wanted to trick him into thinking he hadn't been accepted. But the truth couldn't stay hidden for long. The neighbour Jack had sent the admission letter to her family. Nath expressed a strong desire to leave, even though Lydia tried to stop him. Lydia asked her brother to call her from school. Nath became busier and more impatient with Lydia until her death.

Siblings are the closest people in the world, beyond parents. Nath had done his duty as an older brother. According to Western family teleology, every family member has the right to follow their own dream and live for themselves, not just for the family. Learning is a normal part of life, but Lydia didn't think that way. She held on tightly to Nath, afraid that he would leave her. As his younger sister, Lydia should have supported her brother to finish his schooling. Siblings should help each other and respect their differences. Lydia could have also left, just like her brother. Western family values focus too much on individual independence, which can cause people to become too focused on their own needs while ignoring others. This is why Lydia just wanted to hold her brother back, while Nath wanted to escape from their situation.

Due to the lack of parental love, Nath found happiness and fulfilment only in astronomy. Ethics says that egoists, who are focused on their own pleasure, and utilitarians, who pursue personal happiness, can also express love for others by helping them for their own happiness (106). Despite trying many times to get his parents' attention, Nath failed, and this led him to want to escape. In family ethics, it is emphasised that everyone is equal. But Nath's parents focused all their attention on Lydia, which made him uncomfortable and that was why Nath wanted to escape. Parents should treat each child as a friend, communicate with them equally, and listen to them to help their children grow.

Hannah, the youngest child in the family, often hid under the dinner table or in small corners of the house because her parents and siblings paid no attention to her. She never dared to get too close to her family because they would ignore her. Her hobby was collecting things her family used and discarded. Despite being treated this way, she still loved everyone. After Lydia disappeared, Hannah once thought about what life would be like without her sister. She imagined sitting at the best seat at the table, living in the big bedroom, and getting all the best things from her parents. But this was just wishful thinking. She knew everything about her family, but no one cared to know her. After Lydia's death, her parents realised they had another daughter, and Nath realised he had only one sister.

Although Celeste Ng has lived in America for many years and is deeply influenced by Western family ethics, many elements of Chinese traditional family ethics can be found in her work. She skilfully integrates these elements into her literature. Modern Chinese family ethics support freedom in marriage. Modern marriage is based on love, and Engels pointed out, "In a marriage based on love, keeping love in marriage is what makes it moral" (78). Love is the main force in family relationships, as it is built on social and emotional bonds. Love can adjust relationships between spouses and serve as a basic moral foundation for marriage. Therefore, family is connected through the emotional bonds between spouses and children. Marilyn and James' marriage was based on love, but it wasn't completely pure.

Marilyn hid the fact that her mother had racial prejudice against James, and James hid his Chinese heritage to Marilyn. James considered himself American and emphasised on American culture, deliberately hiding his Chinese roots from Marilyn. So, their marriage was free but not completely honest. If their three children had been treated equally, Nath wouldn't have tried to escape, and Lydia wouldn't have died. This clearly shows love and equality are important. Traditional family ethics demanded that men should handle external affairs, and women should manage internal affairs. In her book, Celeste supports women



working outside but also emphasises the importance of a mother's role.

In a family, everyone should feel united, and the essence of individuals is found in their connection to the family, not just as independent people (177). Parents are responsible for raising and educating their children, while children are responsible for supporting and helping their parents. In *Everything I Never Told You* the concept of family teleology refers to the goals and expectations that shape the Lee family's relationships and decisions. Marilyn wants Lydia to succeed academically and professionally, also to accomplish the dreams she could not achieve. James, however, wants Lydia to be socially accepted, hoping to shield her from the racial alienation he experienced. These conflicting expectations place overwhelming pressure on Lydia, leading to miscommunication and isolation. The novel ultimately shows how rigid family goals, when based on personal regrets and societal pressures, can lead to unintended harm rather than unity.

Works Cited

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