

Lydia's Identity Crisis in *Everything I Never Told You**

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Abstract—Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* narrates a tragedy that occurred in a cross-ethnic family in the 1960s. This paper focuses on Lydia's social, family and campus life environment on the strength of Erickson's theory of self-identity and personality to analyze Lydia's identity crisis. Racism and feminist movement confused Lydia's sense of self-belonging and self-values, which gave rise to her identity crisis. Parents' exceptional expectations of Lydia and her excessive dependence on her brother also caused Lydia's self-differentiation and self-unity obstacles, resulting in her identity crisis. Finally, with Erickson's self-identity theory, this paper analyzes Lydia's obstacles to self-cognition for abnormal heterosexual emotion and alienated peer relationship. The exploration of Lydia's identity crisis will help further interpret the theme of race, gender and self-cognition revealed in the novel.

Keywords—Celeste Ng; *Everything I Never Told You*; identity crisis

I. INTRODUCTION

The word "identity" derived from Late Latin "identitas" and old French "identité", also called "sameness" and means "homogeneity" and "individuality". In modern psychology, identity was first put forward by Sigmund Freud, while on the basis of Freud's concept of identity, Erik Erikson, a great American developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, systematically advanced the theory of identity development in 1958. He believes that identity "connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (self sameness) and a persistent sharing of some kind of essential character with others" (Erikson, 1958:109). In other words, identity refers to a combination of "uniformity" and "difference".

The term "identity crisis" proposed by Erikson, is "a period during which an individual's previous identity is no longer experienced as suitable, but a new identity is not yet established" (Côté & Levine, 2002:95). Freud maintains that the sexual energy existing in the subconscious is the basic motive force of human psychology and the eternal power to determine the development of individuals and society. Nevertheless, he doesn't attach due importance to the role of social environment on the development of personality.

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Erikson insists that one cannot separate "the identity crisis in individual life and contemporary crisis in historical development because the two help to define each other and are truly relative to each other" (Erikson, 1968:23). In order to dive into to identity crisis, in the 1950s, Erikson formulated eight stages of psychosocial development throughout our whole life in his book *Childhood and Society* (1977). One stage following another in time and space, each stage is built on top of the previous stage, and the eight stages are closely tied. Erikson consists that every stage is critical to the personality development and every stage has its own tasks and a particular psychosocial crisis. The crisis he called was not a catastrophic threat, but a main point in development. A successful solution to the crisis can enhance the strength of self, help to form good adaptability, and thus form positive characters, while a failed solution may result in negative characters. Furthermore, a positive solution at one stage contributes to a positive one at the next stage. The eight stages are as following: hope, basic trust vs. basic mistrust; will, autonomy vs. shame; purpose, initiative vs. guilt; competence, industry vs. inferiority; fidelity, identity vs. role confusion; love, intimacy vs. isolation; care, generativity vs. stagnation and wisdom, ego integrity vs. despair (Chen, 2003: 95).

In this novel, Lydia experienced her identity crises. In the context of mix-culture social, and her parents' contradictory expectations, Lydia fails to establish self-identity, and falls into role confusion with infinite inhibition and misery, which leads to Lydia's death.

II. LYDIA'S IDENTITY CRISIS IN SPECIFIC SOCIAL CONTEXTS

A. Immigration and Hybridity

America, the "salad bowl", is a typical immigrant country. From 1881 to 1920, the number of immigrants for the third time surged to 23.5 million. 1882-1924 was a period when the immigration policy of the United States changed dramatically. In 1882, the United States implemented the Exclusion Act, which began to exclude and restrict immigration of Chinese nationality, and also issued decrees prohibiting Chinese from intermarriage with white people. Therefore, in American history, interracial marriage was once regarded as a taboo in most areas. Interracial marriage didn't get legal support until 1967, but this phenomenon was

not generally accepted, and the voice of opposition was prevailing.

Everything I Never Told You revolves around the story of a typical Chinese-mixed family, in which the hero Lydia was born in a cross-ethnic family. Lydia's father James is a second-generation American immigrant, but he has been plagued by identity crisis and lacks a sense of belonging as an American. "He had never felt he belonged here, even though he had never set foot anywhere else" (40). James's father was a Chinese who came to America as "person sons" in place of his neighbor's son, because under the influence of anti-China legislation, Chinese laborers have been prohibited from entering the country for more than half a century, so that many Chinese Americans could only come to America as "person sons". "In Chinatowns, the lives of all those paper sons were fragile and easily torn. Everyone's name was false. Everyone clustered together so they wouldn't stand out" (41). Lydia's mother Marilyn is a white man from Virginia, USA. Marilyn is young, ambitious and eager to be different. However, the situation at that time forced her to give up her studies and become a housewife.

The interracial marriage between James and Marilyn was illegal at that time. As the only mixed-race family in the community, their family has been suffering from various troubles caused by racial identity. "His parents never go out or entertain; they have no dinner parties, no bridge group, no hunting buddies or luncheon pals. Like Lydia, no real friends" (59). Lydia inherited her mother's blue eyes, and because of this typical white feature, she was regarded by her father as a creature of racial integration and was therefore expected to integrate into society. Although Lydia inherited the advantages of white mother, she could not change the identity of a "hybrid". In the eyes of white people, she was always a "foreigner" and could not integrate into the mainstream western culture. "But Nath's seen Lydia at school, how in the cafeteria she sits silent while the others chatte...Lydia has never really had friends, but their parents have never known" (15-16). It is this kind of mixed-race family background that made Lydia suffer from discrimination and exclusion in the social environment of anti-China and anti-cross-ethnic marriage at that time, and she was unable to locate herself, lost herself and her identity crisis.

B. Gender and Education

"Feminism is a set of movements and ideological schools that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women" (Hawkesworth, 2006: 20). There were two large-scale women's liberation movements in the history of American women's liberation. The second feminist movement in the 1960s had a profound impact on the changes of American women's political and economic status, the awakening of marriage and family concepts and female consciousness. Women have the rights to education and employment. In the novel, influenced by the feminist movement, Marilyn was eager to get ahead and to realize her ideal of life. In order to show her distinctive features, Marilyn married a Chinese man named James Lee. The

second feminist movement advocated gender equality and pursued gender equality education. Not only can men and women study in the same school, but also they should study the same courses and specialties. Advocates put forward "Equal access to education and equal education".

Although the educational opportunities of American women have been increased greatly, equal educational opportunities do not only mean the same education. At that time, a famous American social critic contended that "Our education system ostensibly provides girls with an open and free marriage life and professional life, but the fact is that they seldom exist in actual society" (Wang, 2002: 235). When Marilyn saw Wolff, a female doctor, her determination to change her own destiny was inspired. She told herself: "You don't want this. There will be more to your life than this (97). So she resolutely decided to return to the university to study. But the trivial things after marriage changed Marilyn's life track, she has to put all her hopes on Lydia when she knew that she had no hope of realizing her dream. "In her mind, Marilyn spun out Lydia's future in one long golden thread, the future she was positive her daughter wanted...Every day, it seemed more possible" (159). Marilyn wanted Lydia to finish her doctor dream for her. In order to keep her mother and the family, Lydia chose the life that her mother had arranged for herself. However, this kind of imposed love is just like a shackle that binds Lydia tightly. When she realized that she could not escape, thus she chose to end her painful fate.

C. The American Dream

The spiritual principles of the American dream are liberalism, individualism, populism, pragmatism, competition and conquest. Generally speaking, it is understood as maximizing personal freedom, the most advanced material progress and the richest, especially the most equal chance of success. Therefore, the American dream is not a world dream, and it can't bring benefits to people around the world, but a personal dream for a strong America. The personal experience of Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of the United States, has become the best example to explain the American dream. Guided by this dream of pragmatism and utilitarianism, Americans began to measure their personal happiness and enterprising spirit by materialistic criteria: how much money they earned, how many houses they bought and what famous universities their children went to. Americans printed Franklin's portrait on the hundred-dollar bills, which always inspires them to pursue a better material life. Marilyn, a typical American woman wrapped in the American dream, is just so: eager to succeed and become an upper class. When she realized that she could not realize her dream, she imposed it on Lydia. She asked Lydia to do the best in every subject and become the most popular person in school. When knowing that Lydia failed in the physics exam, Marilyn found it hard to accept, fearing that Lydia could not fulfill her dream. So "She worked through the failed test with Lydia again and again until Lydia could solve every problem correctly" (172-173). In this social background with strong utilitarianism, everyone was eager for success, and it was difficult to accept setbacks and

failures. This great pressure plunged Lydia into identity confusion and infinite pain: who she is, what she wants and what kind of life she wants to live. She couldn't locate herself and couldn't master her own destiny. "Feet planted firmly on nothing, Lydia — so long enthralled by the dreams of others—could not yet imagine what that might be..." (275). The identity crisis lets she realize that she has nothing but death to end her own life to terminate the pain.

III. LYDIA'S IDENTITY CRISIS CAUSED BY HER FAMILY

A. Inferiority Complex

The term "inferiority complex" is coined by Alfred Adler, an excellent Austrian psychoanalyst in the 19th century. Adler defined "inferiority complex" as a person's helpless performance in the face of unsolved problems. According to Adler's description, people with inferiority complex will usually avoid or hide the problems that really need to be solved. They acquiesce in their weakness and incompetence, hesitate in the face of difficulties, and stop pursuing success eventually.

In the novel, the father James is a typical character possessed by inferiority complex. Because of his Chinese identity, he has been ostracized by American society since he was born: his father went to California with a false name; he encountered the tricky question in Lloyd's entrance examination; he was discriminated against by his classmates and teacher. Gradually he has learned to be silent and try to hide his identity. He didn't want his classmates to see his father again, refused to draw his family tree, and shut himself off from all the social activities. He lived in the White prejudice all his life: "this little man, five foot nine at most and not even *American*, was going to teach them about cowboys?" (31). James wants to integrate into white society through his own efforts. Even the original intention of marrying Marilyn was also that she could be perfectly integrated into the crowd. However, when he applied for a teaching post at Harvard with excellent grades, he was still rejected because of his identity, and finally he could only devote himself to serving at Middlewood College in Ohio. And he lived in a community where "interpersonal entropy reigned, hence neighborhood relations became the secondary" (Shen, 2018: 193). James finally realized that he could never really be an American, so he gave up his ambition and accepted the ignoble fate. But he didn't want Lydia to suffer from this inferiority complex, and hoped her would no longer be "different". His Christmas gift to Lydia is a book: *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, hoping her to get along well with her friends and be popular without caring about what she really like. He just imposed his pain on Lydia, not giving her real paternal love. With such heavy mental pressure, Lydia felt inhibited and desperate for not living under others' expectation and losing herself.

B. Sense of Guilt and Stress

Lydia's mother Marilyn is a character of new feminism: she wanted to study, eager to stand out, and longed to be equal to men. She hated to be a traditional woman like her mother, angry about the smallness of her mother's life. She

wanted to be a doctor, because she thought that it was the furthest thing she could imagine from her mother's life. Although it was hard for women to become a doctor like men at that time, she still bears ridicule and pressure and study hard. She wanted to be the best and get others' admiration. "By midterm, she set the curve for every exam, and instructor had stopped smirking. She had always like surprising people that way (27)". Even after getting married, she still had hope for her wanted life, so she resolutely decided to leave her husband and kids to pursuit her dream.

However Marilyn's departure has brought an indelible wound to Lydia's young heart. At night, Lydia was always dreaming terrible things: she was crawling with spiders, she was tied up with snakes, and she was drowning in a teacup (135). "Their mother's absence gnawed at them quietly, a dull and spreading hurt (130)". Lydia insisted that she and Nath had done something wrong that made their mother angry and had not done well to satisfy her expectations. She prayed that as long as her mother could come back, she would do everything her mother told her and never disobey her mother. "...she had though her mother might really be dead, and those weeks and months had left a persistent, insistent ache in her chest, like a pulsing bruise" (223). Marilyn's departure undoubtedly brought serious trauma to Lydia's young heart. Since then, Lydia has been living in fear that she didn't meet her mother's requirements, that she would lose her mother again and that the family would be broken. So she forced herself to accept all of the arrangements of her mother and live for her mother and the whole family. She not only forces herself to struggle to learn boring math, intricate biology and physics, but also has to pretend to like everything her mother arranged for her. "All her life she had heard her mother's heart drumming one beat: *doctor, doctor, doctor...* Lydia could not imagine another future, another life" (163). The pressure of failure finally overwhelmed this 16-year-old girl.

C. Attachment and Self-differentiation

John Bowlby defined the term "attachment" as a "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969: 194). In the face of students' indifference, parents' double expectations and learning pressure, Lydia only got understanding, comfort and companionship from her older brother Nath. He is not only her brother, but also her friend and confidant. In this family, as the only one who know about both Lydia and their parents, Nath felt empathy and sympathy for Lydia's suffering. In fact, since kindergarten, Nath has played an important role in Lydia's life. When having a meal, Nath would help her to occupy a seat in the dining room of the school and let her sit opposite him. When taking the school bus, Nath would save her seat. When Lydia was wronged, as long as Nath blinked at her, she could receive his sympathy and comfort. Therefore Nath is the most important source of strength that she can continue to endure the confused and painful life.

However, when attaching too much to a person, it is easy to produce dependent personality disorder and impede the formation of self-differentiation and independent personality. DPD (dependent personality disorder) is manifested as a

kind of psychological problem that "in order to get warmth or psychological satisfaction from others, people will give up their interests and hobbies, and even stoop to compromise. As a result, this kind of psychology will gradually restrict and hinder their initiative, independence and interests. When dependency comes to an end, there will be an unusual sense of despair or destruction" (Yang, 2012: 93). Self-differentiation, put forward by a family system psychologist Bowen, refers to the ability of individuals to distinguish between rational thinking and emotional response, including the differentiation of individuals' inner and interpersonal aspects (Skowron, 1998). At adolescence, self-differentiation has an impact on teenagers' independence and the formation of independent personality. Individuals with low degree of self-differentiation are easy to rely on others in interpersonal communication, lack rational judgment and more likely to be negatively affected by pressure.

In the novel, the phenomenon of DPD in Lydia is characterized by absolute obedience to her mother and overdependence on her brother. She is eager to possess her brother's company, while the desire is irrational. When Lydia knew that Nath would leave her, she hid his the admission letter from Harvard University. In order to keep Nath, Lydia hides his letter again and again. When Nath stopped comforting her and began to be indifferent, her spiritual world collapsed. "... and something wobbled inside Lydia and tumbled into her chest with a clang" (170). Her attachment to her brother leads her to lack of personality independence and to lose her self-awareness. Therefore it's no doubt that Lydia is unable to follow her own inner thoughts and traps in her identity crisis.

IV. LYDIA'S IDENTITY CRISIS CAUSED BY HER CAMPUS LIFE

A. Puppy Love and Identity Confusion

Puppy love (also known as a crush, calf love or kitten love) is an informal term for feelings of love, romance, or infatuation, often felt by young people during their childhood and adolescence (Ray, 2004: 16). Under the pressure of her parents' constraint and Nath's leave, she wants to be friends with the "bad boy" Jack whom Nath hates. "But she knew that Nath didn't like him at all, never had, and for this reason alone she was pleased to see him" (182). At first, Lydia wanted to attract the attention of her older brother Nath by making friends with Jack and wanted to keep Nath. After getting alone with Jack, Lydia experienced a different life: smoking, being alone with boys, seeing condoms for the first time, learning to drive and kissing boys for the first time. These different experiences makes Lydia, who has been suffering from depression, feel stimulation and release. She wants to associate with Jack, the "bad boy", and to get rid of the shackles of family and school. Usually for patients with dependent personality disorder, when a close relationship is coming to an end, they may be anxious to find another person to get help and comfort. "At home, alone on the landing, Lydia cradled the handset in her hands for a long time after the click. The tears that had choked off her voice dried away. A slow, burning anger at Nath began to smolder

inside her, his parting words ringing in her ears (264)". When Lydia was extremely disappointed in Nath, overwhelmed by anger and disappointment, she showed her love to Jack. She thirsted for solace from Jack, while she received a more unacceptable fact: Jack is loving Nath! This cruel blow finally pulverizes her fragile heart and the last shred of hope. Jack's words are like a dagger getting right down to her heart. "At least I don't let other people tell me what I want... What about you, Miss Lee? What do you want?" (269). Lydia thought that Jack liked her, she also knew him, and finally there was another one understanding her except Nath. However, when she knew the fact, she felt she was abandoned again and she never knew herself. She was thoroughly cheated off the identity confusion and she want to change the dilemma. She realized that the root of all problems started from the drowning incident. She thinks that as long as she can swim to the shore alone, she can start over again, get new life and bravely face everything. The identity crisis finally ends up Lydia's life.

B. Sociability and Psychological Problems

The fifth stage of Erickson's personality development theory is adolescence, from 12 years old to 18 years old, which is a crucial stage. The task of development is to establish self-identity and prevent identity confusion, and experience the realization of fidelity. In Erickson's opinion, identity achievement means that teenagers can make clear choices after carefully considering major issues in the process of self-development, which finally let them become more independent and can choose and guide their own future (Erikson, 1998: 101). The state corresponding to self-identity is role confusion, that is, teenagers can't form clear self-concept. Erickson described the late adolescence as a "identity crisis" period, during which individuals had to go through a process of re-cognition and faced with various self-development problems: the choice of values, the establishment of gender roles and so on. When he is inconsistent with the external environment, he will return to the inner world and become self-enclosed (Erikson, 1998: 85).

In the novel, because of her Chinese identity, Lydia suffers from her classmates and teachers' apathy and discrimination. Gradually she becomes lonely and incommunicative and she has no friend at school, while her father who is desperately eager to integrate into American society wants Lydia to be popular. On Lydia's birthday, James gave her a silver chain, because "everyone was wearing silver this year" (227). He wants Lydia to get well with her classmates and to integrate into their life. When he hears Lydia talking with her classmates on the phone, he is very excited with full of hope in his eyes. In order not to let her father down, she pretends to chat with "her friend" on the phone. "Lydia, phone still pressed to her cheek, could hardly believe how easy it had been to bring that bright flush of joy to her father" (179). Lydia is not really popular and she just an "outsider" for people. Everyone keeps her at a distance while her parents would not know it. The country, which advocates equality for all, discriminates against interracial people. In such social thoughts, Lydia failed to locate her

own identity. Although she has blue eyes and study hard, she is never an American and never has a real friend.

C. Resignation VS. Rebellion

Lydia's identity confusion also reflects on her ambivalence of resignation and rebellion. "Lydia herself — the reluctant center of their university — every day, she held the world together. She absorbed her parents' dreams, quieting the reluctance that bubbled up within" (Ng, 2014: 160). Yong Lydia was traumatized because of her mother's department. In order to keep her mother, Lydia decided to do everything Marilyn wanted and help her to realize every dream. In order to satisfy her father, she pretends to like his gifts, to be popular in school, to chat happily with "her friends" on the phone. She had been afraid so long, and afraid that "one day, her mother would disappear again, that her father would crumble, that their whole family would collapse once more" (272). So she had to do nothing but resign.

However, in Lydia's heart, she wants to reject to live oppressive life. When she was familiar to Jack, she began to smoke, to be alone with him, to fail physics exam... She just wants to do something contrary to her parents' expectation loading her down. Inspired by the American Dream, every American strives to succeed and it is natural for "good students" to be on both learning and interpersonal skill, while "bad students" is treated with discrimination and detestation. "Who am I?" Lydia finally found the answer with her life.

V. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Lydia's incident is not only her personal tragedy, but also the tragedy of cross-ethnic families, and even of the whole society. The racial discrimination brought by the immigration wave lets every member of the interracial family suffer from struggle. The sexism and feminism wave give Marilyn chance to realize her dream but the road to success is destined to be bumpy. The utilitarian American Dream makes Lydia weary. Parents are the first teachers of children in their growth, while her parents' expectations bind her tightly. She only finds comfort from her brother, but comes near to a breakdown because of his leave. At school, she has no one friend and her all classmates keep her at a distance. The fantasy love makes her despair. Finally Lydia chose death to end up her painful life. Lydia didn't position herself correctly in the process of identity exploration. During teenagers' growth, they first should establish the correct self-awareness, learn about their merits and drawbacks, and fully develop potential abilities. They should plan their life and live for themselves. Secondly, they also should improve their psychological diathesis and the ability to handle stress ability. Moreover, they are supposed to try to establish harmonious and consistent interpersonal relationships and master some communication skills. Only by doing so, can they get rid of others' expectations to find the real self. But because Lydia failed to do the above, it caused a series of identity crises. Identity crisis is an important motif discussed by the author in this novel, which gives readers profound enlightenment.

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