

The Multifaceted Representations of Irritation in Weike Wang's *Chemistry*

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ABSTRACT

As a newly-emerged Chinese American female writer, Weike Wang has won many literary awards including the Pen/Hemingway Award for her debut fiction *Chemistry*. Influenced by the "affective turn," *Chemistry* is characterized by the overwhelming depiction of the negative feelings of the Chinese American female protagonist, especially "irritation", which deeply manifests the politics of ugly feelings. Drawing on Sianne Ngai's Irritation theory, the present paper examines the representations of irritation of the Chinese American female protagonist in *Chemistry*. The results indicate that the irritated Chinese American female protagonist demonstrates multifaceted representations in different contexts. In the laboratory, she is represented as a thwarted female Ph. D. candidate; in the family, she is an unhappy daughter; in the social interaction realm, she is a weird woman. The specific manifestations of irritation include hyper-responsiveness, over-repression, self-internalization, physical discomfort, venting emotions to wrong objects, and giving rise to other negative emotions. Last but not least, her irritation, actually, is the embodiment of the predicaments confronting Chinese American women in contemporary American society.

Keywords: Weike Wang, *Chemistry*, Representations of irritation, Chinese American women's literature.

1. INTRODUCTION

As observed by Pankaj Mishra, individuals are possibly living in and experiencing "the era of irritation" [1]. When it comes to women's expression of irritation, Mary Holmes indicates that "women of lower social status particularly are less likely to express anger, and that most women are unlikely to express anger to social superiors" [2]. In this sense, this repressed irritation echoes Sianne Ngai's definition for "irritation" — "a conspicuously weaker and inadequate form of anger" [3].

Released in 2017, Weike Wang's *Chemistry* has won wide recognition from the American literary scholarship for its unique way of depicting the story of an unnamed Chinese American woman in pursuit of her doctoral degree in chemistry, and more importantly, for its representation of the negative feelings of Chinese American women in contemporary multicultural American society. The

female protagonist in this fiction has long been haunted by negative emotions, particularly irritation, a "minor, low-intensity negative affect" [3]. Irritation thereafter "becomes the index of a more general affective opacity at work" [3] throughout this fiction. From the perspective of her boyfriend Eric, if she "could be an emotion, it would be spite" [4]. On some occasions, even her laughter is "very manic sounding" [4]. But she is also noticed for the "faint hint of offishness" [3], which actually "comes to inflect the novel's organizing affect" [3]. For example, when she practices the piano at an early age, she is criticized by her piano teacher — "You don't have the emotion...You play everything correctly, the pedaling precise, but you play like a robot, without pain or sorrow, without happiness or joy" [4].

Since irritation "is a situated and embodied emotional activity" [2], based on a detailed inquiry into "the problem of incorrect or 'inadequate' anger" for this female protagonist, the present thesis contextualizes her representation of irritation in

three different spaces — the laboratory, her family as well as broader social interaction realm. The embodiments of her irritation in different contexts demonstrate diverse representations. In the laboratory, this irritated female protagonist is represented as a thwarted Ph. D. candidate in the science domain; in her family, she is represented as an unhappy daughter who is in an enduring state of weaker and inadequate anger; in broader social interaction realm, she is seen as a weird woman who is easily prone to being irritated.

2. SIANNE NGAI'S IRRITATION THEORY

With reference to the previous philosophies of emotion, Sianne Ngai turns to ugly feelings, the long-neglected or devalued minor affects, so as to "expand and transform the category of 'aesthetic emotions'" [3]. According to her, all the feelings analyzed in her monograph *Ugly Feelings* — envy, anxiety, paranoia, irritation, animateness, and stuplidity, are explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. In fact, most of these feelings tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions... If Ugly Feelings is a bestiary of affects, in other words, it is one filled with rats and possums rather than lions, its categories of feeling generally being, well, weaker and nastier [3].

In terms of irritation, Ngai understands it as "defined by a flatness or ongoingness entirely opposed to the 'suddenness' on which Aristotle's aesthetics of fear depends" [3]. As one of the primary ugly feelings, irritation is more an enduring negative state of mind than a sudden outpouring of emotion, indicating the subject's more profound inner psychic trauma beneath the "offishness", repressiveness, and numbness. In addition, irritation is also "the feeling of bodily change" [5], such as the sensation of physical pain. It is similar to Aristotle's definition of anger in *Rhetoric* — "a desire, accompanied by pain" [6].

Furthermore, through the examination of an African American fiction *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, it is noteworthy that in Ngai's stance, irritation on some occasions can entail the hyperresponsiveness to other objects in the way of obstructed reaction or negation to the subject's external surroundings which in reality motivate this affect. To put it another way, in face of the particular political incentives, instead of directly reacting to the "right things", the irritated subjects

usually are repressed or turn their attention to and even take their anger out on the "wrong things". This suggests that irritation usually "lacks an explicit occasion or object" [3].

To sum up, as one of negative emotions in the broader theoretical framework of ugly feelings, irritation naturally possesses all the features of ugly feelings, including the emphasis on the obstructed agency to specific political situations and the tendency to give rise to other negative feelings. Moreover, as a weaker or inadequate form of anger, it is distinct in the much longer endurance, which may exert subtle but enduring effects on the mental or even physical state of the subject who in most cases is repressed or takes insufficient reaction to the external surroundings.

3. IN THE SPACE OF LABORATORY: A THWARTED FEMALE PH. D. CANDIDATE

In the space of laboratory, the irritated female protagonist in *Chemistry* is represented as a thwarted Ph. D. candidate. She has been in pursuit of her doctoral degree in the field of synthetic organic chemistry. As a Chinese American, she is supposed to have achieved a lot in her study, but the fact turns opposite. She encounters a series of unprecedented challenges in her doctoral experiments and research projects—

For months I am running the same reactions over and over again, the seventh step of a twenty-four-step synthesis, just so I can get the yield up from 50 percent to 65 because anything under 60 is unacceptable to the advisor. Then for months, I am running step eight. Then for years, the advisor is asking, Do we have it, the molecule? And I say, No, it is still at large [4].

The frustration from her futile efforts makes her "a little mad" [4]. Brian Parkinson points out that emotions usually "involve a direction or orientation towards an object" [7]. However, instead of directly releasing her irritation "at the right things and towards the right people" [8] through "overt, explicitly antagonistic or vehement forms" [3], she takes it out on wrong object in a way of "an absence or deficit of expression" [3]. The female protagonist is struggling with her doctoral program. But when her Ph. D. supervisor comes to ask her "where do you see your project going in five years" [4] and suggests that she should "start a new project, one that is more within your[her] capabilities" [4], she is filled with "the desire to throw something at his

head" [4]. Moreover, "depending on what he says, it is either the computer or the desk" [4]. Her response to her supervisor indicates her state of irritation, but this emotional response is kind of "inappropriateness" [3]. It is obviously that her supervisor is not the proper and right object of her irritation. Besides, no matter how terrible this desire is, it is simply an internal monologue without becoming expressed. This "failure of emotional release" [3] signals her "struggle to inhibit emotion" [3]. Therefore, her irritation "marks the very opposite of having the correct capacity for anger" [3].

Her insufficient irritation "accumulate[s] over time, as a form of affective value" [5]. This time, she takes her anger out on the beakers in a much stronger and more violent way.

I gaze up at the ceiling lights, which are blinding, so I gaze down at the floor, which is dirty, so I take to folding a sheet a paper until I can't fold it anymore and then I fold another sheet...Finally, the lab coat comes off. I place it neatly into the drawer. Then I smash five beakers on the ground. I shout, Beakers are cheap...I shout, If I really wanted to make a statement, I would have opened the argon box to air [4].

But in her mind, she "did not think I[*she*] was shouting" but "was whispering" [4] instead. This ambivalence between actually shouting and thoughtfully whispering still indicates her repressed state of irritation, a "mild anger" [3].

According to Sianne Ngai's construct of ugly feelings, negative emotions, including irritation, "tend to interfere with the outpouring of other emotions" [3]. In the fiction, the female protagonist is irritated by her poor experiment and academic performance. This negative affect entails "its close relations — bother, annoyance, vexation, aggravation, pique" [3]. Therefore, when she is doing highly sensitive chemistry experiments, she is so agitated that she usually "wish[es] to put my[*her*] head on days of nothing going right" [4]. Influenced by this negative feeling, she either adds "the wrong amount of catalyst" or adds "the wrong catalyst" [4].

In addition, the irritation of this female protagonist is repressed in a way of inducing another kind of ugly feeling — envy, which is inclined to be perceived "as a static sign of deficiency rather than a motivated affective stance" [3]. Out of envy, she usually compares her academic career with her boyfriend Eric. They are

from the same lab, but Eric has successfully gained his Ph. D. degree in chemistry and is "looking for academic jobs" [4] while she is struggling with her experiments and has great difficulty in graduation. Moreover, as she claims in terms of their respective academic career, "his career path is very straight, like that of an arrow to its target. If I were to draw my path out, it would look like a gas particle flying around in space" [4]. In the lab, she also shifts her focus of envy to her female colleague, who usually quotes "the wisdom of many chemists before her. You must love chemistry even when it is not working. You must love chemistry unconditionally" [4]. In the eyes of the female protagonist, this female lab researcher is "a solver of hard problems. Her desk is next to mine[*hers*] but is neater and more result-producing" [4]. Moreover, this female lab colleague has so "many, many publications" [4] that the female protagonist is exceedingly jealous of her achievements, since she has "only one paper out" [4] — "If I were that accomplished, I would casually bring up my published papers in conversation. Have you read so-and-so? Because it is quite worth your time. The tables alone are beautiful and well formatted" [4].

In this sense, faced with such a successful counterpart, the female protagonist cannot help but envying — "had I never met her, I would have asked less often, Why would a field need me when it has someone like her" [4]. Because of envy, after she withdraws from the doctoral program, she also declines the concern and care from this female researcher — "this is very nice of you but I don't think I can do any of those things" [4].

As a female Ph. D. candidate with few academic achievements, the female protagonist is also usually exposed to some gender-biased or even misogyny discourses. In the novel, confronted with these gender-based discrimination discourses, the female protagonist represses her irritation. A male researcher in her lab once claims that "women do not belong in science", simply because "women lack the balls to actually do science" [4]. Despite the fact that the discourse of this kind sounds ridiculous and absurd, considering the enormous contributions made by female scientific researchers, it has never been unfamiliar to female researchers in scientific academia. On hearing this, instead of arguing with this guy and even fighting with him, the female protagonist keeps silent and just simply accepts this judgement — "which isn't wrong. We do lack balls" [4]. Here, her repressed feeling indicates "an absence or deficit of expression" [3]. In Ngai's stance, ugly feelings are usually featured

by "suspended agency from the start" [3], which is also true of irritation. As for irritated people, they are usually stuck in "the absence of a strong emotion where we are led to expect one" [3]. The silence and offishness of the female protagonist which suggest her repressed irritation in the face of gender discrimination, foreground her "irritation's liminality or instability as an emotional response" [3].

Furthermore, the obstructed agency of being irritated can be further confirmed by her retarded reactions. Instead of directly questing for the answer from the lab guy who makes that statement on the spot, she chooses to seek an answer from her boyfriend on another day. She asks her boyfriend Eric — "how many balls do you think I have?" [4]. This means that she does care about the judgment on women researchers, but she is obstructed from expressing her questioning. Moreover, through the act of posing a question to her boyfriend, a male researcher, and waiting for his answer, it can be identified that the female protagonist seems powerless and weaker in the face of gender-based discrimination. This can be further exemplified by her inner monologue towards this question — "I was hoping he would have said something along the lines of three and a half" [4]. Instead of self-asserting resistance to misogyny discourse, she quietly waits for others' affirmation and even fails to express her thought.

Since ugly feelings are "sites of negative affect experienced primarily as a sense of suspended or blocked or self-canceling agency" [9], the female protagonist also demonstrates "obstructed" physical behavior when encountering gender discrimination. Whenever in the lab she sees flyers and commercials which "encourage girls to go into science" [4], instead of revealing this hypocritical advocating by means of tearing up these papers, she simply "divert[s] my[her] gaze" [4]. This kind of behavior manifests her insufficient reaction to invisible gender discrimination hidden in the gender equality advocating.

Besides, overdrinking also indicates her repressed irritation. After withdrawing from the lab, the female protagonist drowns her irritation in wine — "I have procured a bottle of gin from the liquor store and placed it on the table. Now I am watching the liquid inside disappear" [4]. She also drinks a lot in a bar—

I have raised my hand a dozen times to ask a question. Can I have another drink? Another drink? Another? When the drinks start to talk back (be

careful with me, I am filled with hard liquor and dark thoughts), I tell the bartender and he tells me to leave [4].

Under intense academic pressure, she feels in no position to release her anger, for she is not "a girl with three balls" [4] and only publishes one academic paper. In this case, she just represses her supposed strong emotions by drowning herself in wine.

To sum up, in the context of laboratory, the irritated female protagonist is mainly represented as a thwarted Ph. D female candidate. She is observed by her failure to release her anger at the right objects or in a right way. She relieves her anger at wrong objects, such as her Ph. D. supervisor and beakers. In addition, since ugly feelings are prone to entail other negative feelings, the irritation of this female protagonist gives rise to agitation and envy. Furthermore, instead of directly releasing her anger, on most occasions, she represses her anger, which can be proved by her offishness, obstructed, retarded action, and drowning herself in wine.

4. IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY: AN UNHAPPY DAUGHTER

In the context of family, the irritated female protagonist in *Chemistry* is mainly represented as an unhappy daughter who is "dealt the worse traits" [4]. In her mother's words, she fails to "pick the better traits" [4] in the womb. Therefore, as a daughter, she "ends up with your [her] father's terrible temper" as well as "my[her mother's] poor vision" [4]. However, confronted with the negative comments from her parents, her anger is largely "obstructed". Just as Sianne Ngai points out, "the minor and inadequate affect of irritation manages not only to usurp and upstage anger, but even to upstage the fact of anger's absence" [3]. Instead of expressing her dissatisfaction and complaint, she demonstrates her insufficient irritation via internalizing the negative evaluations of this kind — "I don't want to believe this but it has become so ingrained" [4].

As she realizes, "the way you talk to your human children becomes their inner voice" [4]. This kind of internalization is also unveiled when she selects the color for qipao. When she is young, her mother usually says to her, "see how red clashes with your skin tone...You have your father's skin, dark and swarthy, fitting if you were to live in the countryside and blend in with the soil" [4]. Feeling irritated, she does not argue with her mother, but

gradually internalizes the concept that red does not match her. "I can't see myself in the red and choose a deep burgundy color" [4]. Internalization as a result of insufficient anger is also reflected in her efforts to "improve" her appearance. Her mother once comments that "your nose: if only slightly higher. Your forehead: if only slightly wider. Your mouth: if only slightly more upturned, less sulky" [4]. In view of this, the female protagonist tries her best to combat her drooping mouth corner — "I would say that at least 10 percent of my energy is dedicated to keeping my mouth in a straight line" [4]. She also internalizes her mother's theory about hair, which claims that "too much hair will suck nutrients away from the head and leave it empty" [4]. In this sense, she is not only usually "pruning my[her] split ends like a fiend" [4], but also keeps "her hair boyishly short" [4] by telling "the man with scissors to cut off six inches immediately" and "cut off two more" [4].

Apart from internalizing the negative evaluations from her parents, the irritation of this female protagonist is also expressed in constant nightmares. She once shares with her psychological therapist her nightmare — "I was swimming in an Olympic-sized pool of dichloromethane...I swam and swam and drowned" [4]. Dreams, particularly nightmares can reveal what the person endeavors to repress. Sianne Ngai notices that irritation "bears an unusually close relationship to the body's surfaces or skin" [3]. Dreaming about swimming in dichloromethane, "a solvent that burns when rubbed on skin" [4], indicates her high level of stress and misery. She is highly irritated, so she feels as if she were in a pool of dichloromethane which burned her skin all the time. Even worse, feeling herself drowned implies her state of asphyxia imposed by her parents. She is also haunted by another nightmare. In that nightmare, she dreams about she is falling—

The worst dreams I have are when I am falling. I am tipping back in a chair and suddenly I am going backward, toward a ground that does not exist. Falling feels like someone has taken my heart and dribbled with it [4].

The dream is the projection of reality. This nightmare indicates her on-going and enduring state of feeling insecure, which is the manifestation of her state of irritation in the context of family.

In addition to nightmares, she is also troubled by insomnia which is usually accompanied by other physical discomfort symptoms, such as vomiting.

Five sleepless nights ensue, along with fear and guilt and persistent shaking and shivering and trying many times to tie my shoes but being unable to hold the laces and having to ask Eric for help, and wanting to throw up but also being unable to because I haven't actually eaten anything [4].

Moreover, the bodily discomfort of the female protagonist is also accompanied by physical pain. According to Sianne Ngai, physical pain indicates the subjects' emotional response "to a physical sensation" [3]. In the fiction, the irritation of the female protagonist is also implied in her bodily sensation of pain. She makes use of scientific knowledge to provide vivid accounts of her pain. "Studies have shown that the brain feels exclusion not like a broken heart but like a broken bone. It is physical pain that the brain feels" [4]. Another example is that she feels heart soreness.

What is this feeling? The small pain under my rib cage. A deep soreness, which is impossible, because the heart cannot feel sore, because cardiac tissue cannot feel tired. To feel these things requires nerves that conduct sensation and the heart does not have such nerves [4].

It suggests that her scientific knowledge fails to provide a plausible explanation for her strange sensation of pain in her heart. This physical pain is actually the projection of her state as being irritated. Since William James once formulates that "the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact" [10]. The bodily discomfort and the haunted nightmare reveal her very emotional state as being irritated.

Besides, with reference to Ngai's construct of ugly feelings, which "tend to produce an unpleasurable feeling about the feeling" [3], the irritation of the female protagonist in the family situation induces another negative feeling, namely, fear. She once recalls one of the scenes when her parents fiercely argue with each other on their drive to a barbecue on the highway. Her mother threatens to unclip the seat belt and click the car door handle while her father "floored[s] it to 110" [4]. What she feels is "extreme, extreme fear" with the brain "awash in adrenaline" [4]. The female protagonist thinks that her parents should not have done such dangerous conducts on the highway, which will highly possibly pose a threat to their life. But being powerless in the face of her parents' quarreling and fighting, she feels she cannot do anything but passively waiting. In this case, she is filled with fear. Her symptoms of fear triggered by irritation are also reflected in her hallucination. Sara Ahmed

points out that "fear responds to what is approaching rather than already here" [5]. Although she lives far away from her parents, she will "run from every woman with short black hair and every man of stocky build" [4], since they remind her of her parents, who usually come to question her.

Her irritation also gives rise to her envy for Eric's harmonious and happy family. She once asks Eric — "what is the worst thing your parents have ever said to you? What is the worst thing you have ever seen them do?" [4]. The questions of this kind seem totally absurd for Eric, who "grows up in a happy home" [4]. However, even Eric is "taken aback" [4] by these questions. She further adds — "there must have been a moment when you realized the meanness of a parent" [4]. These seemingly offensive words, however, imply her extreme envy. In her family, quarrels and fighting are extremely common between her parents, and even when she is twelve years old, "for eight months, my [her] mother hides knives under my [her] father's pillow" [4]. Therefore, at the sight of Eric's happy and harmonious family, she feels envious and is eager to dig out something "dark or evil" embedded in that happy family.

Furthermore, it is observed that her irritation also produces the feeling of being ashamed in the context of her family. Her parents, particularly her mother, have poor command of English. The female protagonist usually "walk[s] ten feet in front of her whenever we are out in public" and "pretend[s] not to hear her" [4] when her mother asks for help. Moreover, when her mother makes some oral mistakes, such as mistaking "panthers" for "painter", she feels highly irritated, mortified and corrects her immediately.

Moreover, in her family, the irritated female protagonist also feels lonely, "a conscious, cognitive feeling of estrangement or social separation from meaningful others; an emotional lack that concerns a person's place in the world" [11]. As the single child in her family, she has developed a symptom of "attributing feelings to inanimate things" [4]. Being irritated, she is made in a state of loneliness, for "who else to talk to when the parents fight except walls and banisters and things?" [4].

In a word, in the context of family, the irritated female protagonist is represented as an unhappy daughter. Confronted with negative evaluations from her parents, particularly her mother, she chooses to internalize these devaluations instead of arguing as a way of resistance, which indicates her

inadequate and obstructed anger. In addition, being highly irritated, she is tortured by endless nightmares and insomnias, accompanied by bodily discomforts, particularly physical pains. Furthermore, her irritation also leads to another four negative feelings, namely fear, envy, shame as well as loneliness. After the text edit has been completed, the paper is ready for the template. Duplicate the template file by using the Save As command, and use the naming convention prescribed by your conference for the name of your paper. In this newly created file, highlight all of the contents and import your prepared text file. You are now ready to style your paper; use the scroll down window on the left of the MS Word Formatting toolbar.

5. IN THE REALM OF SOCIAL INTERACTION: A WEIRD WOMAN

Mary Holmes contends that emotions should be perceived as "productive of, as well as produced by, social relationships" [2]. In this sense, in terms of irritation, social interaction is also one of the significant realms to examine the representations of irritation. In this context, the female protagonist is mainly represented as a weird woman, who, on many occasions, is easy to be irritated.

The female protagonist is similarly obstructed when irritated in this realm. The act of being obstruction is mainly in the form of keeping silent. When she is young, she is sent to a weekly Chinese school to "learn how to read and write" [4] in Chinese. At that school, no matter on the playground or in the classroom, she encounters oral humiliation from her non-Chinese classmates — "Ching Chang Chong, sing me a song. Ching Chang Chong, all night long" [4]. "Ching Chang Chong" is an extremely racialized word against Chinese Americans. But confronted with these racialized taunting words, the female protagonist just responds to them in a passive way. She does not shout back or fight with them, but "skip[s] Chinese school that week. Skip[s] Chinese school that month" [4]. As an American of Chinese ancestry, she is supposed to feel mad at these insulting words, but it is weird that she fails to release her anger by just keeping silent and skipping school for avoidance, which also reveals that her irritation is inadequate and weaker.

Sianne Ngai claims that the subject's irritation is characterized by "both an excess and a deficiency of anger" [3]. In this context, the irritation of the

female protagonist is particularly noticed for her "hyperresponsiveness to the subject's external surroundings" [3] in addition to her obstructed action. In her boyfriend Eric's eyes, she is easy to be irritated — "I carry [she carries] close to my[her] chest a ball of barbed wire that I[sh]e sometimes throw[s] at other people" [4], and she "swear[s] so much" [4]. Her excessive irritation can firstly be exemplified by her frequent arguing and quarreling with Eric, whose "temper is nonexistent" [4]. In the fiction, they once fight with each other beside clothing racks. "One thing he says: If you could be an emotion, it would be spite. One thing I say: If you could be an animal, it would be a sloth. But I only say that out of spite" [4]. But, the trigger for their fight is simply a matter of misunderstanding. Eric "inform[s] me[her] that the song playing overhead is in five-four" [4] and he thinks "every musician can tell you that" [4]. However, in the eyes of the female protagonist, what he says is contempt to her — "what are you trying to say?" [4]. She overreacts to Eric's words.

Another quarrel happens when they discuss whether she should go with Eric to Ohio. She is afraid that after going to Ohio, she has to end up being the girl who is "never happy" and carries "that unhappiness everywhere" [4]. But Eric argues that "the comparison you are making is not the same" [4]. Then, this further gives rise to a big fight. "When mad, Eric says nothing. He sits and stares off into space. When really mad, he stands up and goes to another room" [4]. Compared with Eric's unassailable anti-temper, the female protagonist seems excessively angry. She "follow[s] him into that other room to say the same things I[sh]e had said in the room before. Hello, are you listening? Hello, are you deaf?... Let's just stop talking about it and break up" [4].

She even becomes "mad at him for being a good person" [4]. Eric does good deeds all the time and refuses to gain extra advantages at other's expense, which drives her irritated.

A lost package addressed to a house five blocks from us and he walks the five blocks to deliver it. A mistake on our grocery receipt — we got too much change back — and he runs back to the store to return it. But we could have used that for laundry, I said, and he said, It would not have been right [4].

She thinks "his being a better person than me[her] condescension" [4]. Thus, she is angry at him and quarrels with him. Eric says to her, "You know how every cloud has a silver lining? You are the cloud with the dark lining" [4]. By comparing

her to the cloud with the dark lining, Eric means that she is easily irritated and full of spite.

In addition, even in her parents' home, the female protagonist also fights with Eric. The reason for this fight is that Eric refuses to speak Chinese to her parents, although he has learned Chinese for four years.

For an entire weekend, two years ago, he speaks only English to them and they speak only English back. I am beyond irritated. The looks of discomfort, especially from my mother. She forgets the word for salt and has to point to it. What that thing? She asks. Salt. Pepper. Pot. Pan. Eric doesn't notice her tone and tells her each time. Later, we whisper-fight in my old bedroom [4]

Their whisper-fight is gradually developed into a fierce one. The language itself is not so important, but the female protagonist demonstrates her excessive anger when Eric refuses to do it. Instead of keeping silent or obstructed, she even wants to hit Eric by the act of stapling his lips.

Apart from being exceedingly irritated with Eric, she also shows her hyper-angriness to others. When waiting in long lines with an older woman who "considers some more, turning each lampshade in her hands, but in the end purchases nothing" [4], she is irritated "with the furiously tapping foot" [4]. After payment, she tells Eric that "if I were to reimagine Hell, it would be no different from the line we were just in. Except the woman would never decide on a lampshade and the line would never move" [4]. It is only "a twenty-five-minute line" [4] but the female protagonist is surprisingly highly irritated at the line itself as well as the older woman.

Moreover, as Sianne Ngai identifies, "in suggesting an overdetermined responsiveness to her environment or hyperactive judgement...irritation seems closely related to the 'nervousness'" [3]. This trait is also reflected in the irritation of this female protagonist in this context. As she says, "the time Eric and I go to a beach, I cannot sit still. I cannot lie down...beaches make me nervous" [4]. It seems that "everything makes you[her] nervous" [4]. Her apparent nervousness unveils her "heightened sensitivities" [3] to the outer environment, which is the projection of her inner irritation.

In addition, the irritated female protagonist also experiences bodily discomfort, particularly vomiting when having fun with her boyfriend Eric.

He takes me to Six Flags. It is supposed to be a surprise. I have just published that paper. What better way to celebrate, he thinks, than to do something he loved doing as a kid, in hopes that I will love it too. The rides: Wicked Cyclone, The Great Chase, Mind Eraser. But as we are driving up to the gates and I realize where we're going, I ask him to pull the car over so I can throw up. He thinks I am kidding. He doesn't pull over. Then, quietly, I throw up into my hands, and this makes him panic, drive faster, while I try not to spill the liquid in my hands [4].

It seems strange and weird that the female protagonist should throw up when knowing she is going to have fun in a big amusement park. However, as a matter of fact, the rides in amusement parks remind her of her childhood experience of being abandoned by her mother in their own driveway after having fun playing rides as well as witnessing the violence of her father who "throws things" [4] everywhere. This childhood experience has long been irritated her — "I believed my heart to be strong, but not that strong" [4]. Thus, she demonstrates this bodily discomfort as an indication of her irritation.

Her irritation is also manifested in her fear of intimacy. Despite the fact that she has been dating Eric for more than four years, but Eric senses there is still a "ten-inch-thick bulletproof glass" [4] between them, and "behind this glass, he says, he has found more glass" [4]. Furthermore, she finds it uncomfortable to hold hands with Eric. "An involuntary tic I have is that I cannot hold hands for a long period of time. My thumb eventually digs into the center of his palm and makes him let go" [4]. She also demonstrates physical discomfort when dating — "I do this sometimes: hold my breath for entire conversations with men and then feel faint. I cannot hold my breath past four minutes. At four, I must interrupt the guy who is talking and make a gaging sound" [4]. The bodily symptoms of this kind reveal her state of irritation.

All in all, in the realm of social interaction, the irritated female protagonist is represented as a weird woman who demonstrates both deficient anger and excessive irritation. Moreover, her excessive anger is expressed mainly in the form of hyperresponsiveness to the surroundings around her, aggressiveness particularly to her boyfriend Eric, who is good-tempered, as well as nervousness even in a relaxing situation. In addition, her symptoms of bodily discomfort and fear of intimacy also reveal her irritation in this realm.

6. CONCLUSION

Drawing on Sianne Ngai's Irritation theory, the present paper argues that the female protagonist in this fiction has long been haunted by negative emotions, particularly irritation, which can be further interpreted as three kinds of major representations — a thwarted female Ph. D. candidate, an unhappy daughter, and a weird woman. Despite their respective specific manifestations, these representations indicate the current living predicaments facing the Chinese American female millennials, such as the anxiety of being a Ph. D candidate as well as the traumatic original family.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Qifeng Sun is responsible for the analytical framework design, textual analysis and manuscript writing, and Fuyi Feng proofread the manuscript and provided sufficient instructions throughout the whole process.

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