

The Heroines' Predicament of Self-differentiation in Celeste Ng's Fictions

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ABSTRACT

The new-generation Chinese American writer Celeste Ng has won many awards and praises for two novels *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*. Both novels with a recurring family motif, begin with the suspense of a missing girl and narrate the self-differentiation process of Lydia and Izzy across the double shackles of the family and social system. Drawing on the concept Differentiation of Self in Bowen's Family Systems Theory, this present paper is designed to discuss the self-differentiation process of the two gone girls Lydia and Izzy, especially the predicament of individual self-differentiation under different spatial forms. The results indicate a panorama of the dysfunctional family system and dominant social discourse they live in, and reveal a fact that the self-differentiation level is deeply influenced by the family of origin and the mainstream environment, thus discussing the possibility to reconstruct self under the double shackles for individuals.

Keywords: Celeste Ng, Self-differentiation, *Everything I Never Told You*, *Little Fires Everywhere*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Celeste Ng is one of the rising stars among contemporary Asian American writers and the author of two novels, *Everything I Never Told You* and *Little Fires Everywhere*. *Everything I Never Told You* reproduces the predicament and trauma of a mixed-race family under "gaze" where the death secret of Chinese-American heroine Lydia is revealed. In the novel, the author depicts the experience of the mixed-race Chinese family as the main line and the trauma caused by racial and gender discrimination through a variety of complex and subtle family relations. *Little Fires Everywhere* reflects the dilemma of choices into adulthood under the collision of different values from young heroine Izzy's arson and runaway. The novel continues to address issues of race and class, but exhibits stronger literariness, which dilutes the way in which ethnic and gender issues in the previous Chinese American literary works are too political. Being a woman writer, Ng is so sensitive that she has been concerned about the slight changes of the characters and their mental health within the family, and being an ethnic writer, she is conscious of her particular identity, therefore the repeated themes like identity problem, racial and sexual

discrimination, and culture related issues always appear in her works.

Descent is "a person's family origins" [1], which is an inherited identity. Consent is "self-identity and self-realization" [1] outward from family system. The subject does not live in a vacuum, but is affected and restricted by various social relationships. Therefore, identity construction is a two-way, socialized process. Only when "the subject's self-identity agrees with the other's identity to the subject can the subject complete socialized identity construction, and when the two show differences, the subject will feel anxious and alienated" [1]. Located between decent and consent, they are stuck in the predicament of self-differentiation.

Celeste Ng depicts Lydia and Izzy as central characters in the two novels respectively. They share the similar developmental environment and have been struggling to separate themselves from the predicament to keep their personhood. The unspeakable secrets and truths inside family are also interspersed in the flashbacks of their growth from an innocent entity to the differentiated self. On the contrary, they have something different. Lydia is dead by drowning in the end, which is

regarded by many scholars as a "failure" of her efforts to be an independent entity, while Lydia is running away in the end to look for what she wants. From Lydia to Izzy, it can be seen that Celeste Ng has been further dealing with the theme of self.

2. THE SELF-DIFFERENTIATION THEORY

Family systems theory views family as "an emotional system in which interactions among its members are of great significance" [1]. It emphasizes family members' influence on each other and studies one's personal issues in his developmental environment. Family systems theory is originally founded in the field of family counseling and therapy. It holds the view that we should take family into consideration when we find some family member "abnormal" in that family; that family is a whole emotional unit and each member or individual is greatly and spontaneously influenced by the family background and other family members. That is, one's personality, growth and development are deeply connected with his or her family of origin.

Self-differentiation, or differentiation of self, is a key concept that "has been used interchangeably with the similar concepts of individuation and psychological differentiation" [2]. As family systems theory uses the term, differentiation refers to "a process to achieve a direction in life rather than a state of being" [3]. In the use of the terminology of self-differentiation or differentiation of self, Bowen assumes that it is equivalent to "identity" or "individuality". A person with a high level of differentiation of self, "identity" or "individuality", is one who can be "emotionally close to others without emotional fusions or loss of self" [4].

The goal of self-differentiation is a balance of *individuality* and *togetherness*. *Togetherness* is evolved from the idea of family emotional oneness, that is, undifferentiated family ego mass. According to the family theory, "children grow up to achieve varying levels of differentiation of self from the undifferentiated family ego mass. Some achieve almost complete differentiation of self and become clearly defined individuals with well-defined ego boundaries" [4]. *Individuality* refers to an innate force that drives people to be an independent self. Herbert and Irene have summarized that "differentiation of self is demonstrated by "the degree to which a person can think, plan, and follow his or her own values, particularly around

anxiety-provoking issues, without having his or her behavior automatically driven by the emotional cues from others" [4]. A mature person with accomplished individuality and autonomy is one who can think, plan and follow their own values without depending on others.

In terms of family systems theory, any person's level of differentiation reflects that "individual's degree of emotional independence from the family as well as from others outside the family group" [1]. The process from togetherness to individuality is also known as that from fusion to differentiation of self. The state of fusion is negatively correlated with the level of self-differentiation. The higher the degree of fusion or togetherness a person has, the lower sense of self one may express, and vice versa. The differentiation of self is used to deal with two levels: "pseudo-self" and "solid-self" in a person [5]. The pseudo-self is a "pretend" self in concise terms which is created by emotional pressure. Every emotional system, whether it be the family or the society, exerts pressure on individuals to conform to the ideals and principles of the system. The solid self is "intellectually aware of the inconsistency between the groups, and the decision to join or reject membership is an intellectual process based on careful weighing of the advantages and disadvantages" [4]. When people are stuck in the controlling poor-differentiated family and cannot acquire a balance to keep their own self, they will try various strategies like geographic separation (runaway) to break off the ties between family of origin and themselves. Bowen considers such supposed freedom an emotional cutoff — "a flight of extreme emotional distancing in order to break emotional ties" [4], which also is a core concept in Bowen's family systems theory.

In these two novels, Lydia represents silence and obedience, while Izzy represents rebellion and ostracism. From Lydia to Izzy, Celeste Ng has furthered the theme of self-differentiation. Lydia is docile and easy to be controlled, so she has been forced to change by her parents' expectations. Her process of self-differentiation is full of sense of incapability and ends with the price of death. However, Izzy is in the midrange of self-differentiation where she keeps her definite values and beliefs yet tends to be over concerned with the opinions of others and make decisions based on emotional reactivity. After Mia encourages her to "do something" to change the things in her life by saying that "sometimes everything must be burnt to the ground to make way for the growth of new ideas" [6], Izzy dares to run away to look for the

"new". According to Bowen, "the level of 'self', which is established during childhood and adolescence, rarely changes except in the person who makes a structured and long-term efforts to change it" [4]. However, all the sacrifices and efforts they make have paved the way to reach adulthood, which resonates Satir's opinion that "family is a balanced system and each member in the system pays the price to keep the overall unit balanced" [7].

3. HOUSE AND FAMILY: PRIVATE SPACE AS IMPRISONMENT

In many works of literature, the idea of home is associated with comfort and belonging. However, family with house as space imagery, is carried with secrets, adversity and departure in Celeste Ng's writings, which shows the ill-functioning of family dynamics. Both families are depicted as dysfunctional ones in which everyone is trapped. A dysfunctional family by definition has "failed to fulfill its purpose of nurturing the growth of its members" [8]. In dysfunctional families, family member's relationship alternates between *overcloseness* and *overdistance*. Minuchin and his research team members introduced five dysfunctional family structures: "(a) enmeshed families; (b) disengaged families; (c) families with a peripheral male; (d) families with noninvolved parents; and (e) families with juvenile parents" [9]. A sense of feeling overwhelmed and helpless was common to these families.

In Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*, Lydia was born in Chinese-American family filled with enmeshment. Enmeshment refers to "an extreme form of proximity and intensity in family interactions in which members are over-concerned and overinvolved in each other's lives" [1]. Enmeshed families are featured with excessive togetherness and lack of separateness, whose members place too high a value on family cohesiveness and are overly alert to signs of distress, so that they have little inclination to develop a sense of independence. In poorly functioning families, demands for even the most necessary or modest changes may be met with increased rigidity as the family stubbornly attempts to retain familiar rules.

Clearly, the Lees lead a hard life both physically and psychologically and are unable to adjust to it. James has been thinking over their "different" or "unmatched" marriage. Nath, overwhelmed with his family situation, begins studying the outer space,

while Lydia begins to reflect on herself after hearing what Mrs. Allen say "You two be good now, and your mother will be home soon, isn't that right?" [10]. It is the time when Lydia's pseudo self is formed. After reading the red cookbook that her mother brings from Virginia and finding the dry tear stains on the page, Lydia is more sure that her mother is gone because of their siblings' mistakes and they are not what she wanted. Therefore, she promises that she would do whatever her mother wants her to do as long as she comes back.

She would brush her teeth without being asked and stop crying when the doctor gave her shots. She would go to sleep the second her mother turned out the light. She would never get sick again. She would do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted." [10]

To Lydia, Marilyn's return means that her mother has heard her promise, so she would keep her word. Unable to resume her studies, Marilyn begins to hope that she can live out her academic fantasies through Lydia. From simple math questions to professional physics books, the knowledge hovered all around her, clinging to her, every day getting thicker. "Wherever she went, it was there. But every time her mother asked, she said yes, yes, yes" [10]. Unlike Marilyn, James wants her daughter to assimilate into the majority, to be popular and to be different from himself. Marilyn and James displace their insecurities and individual aspirations onto Lydia. Even for Christmas gift, Lydia is given books as presents. Her mother gives her science books, while her father gives her self-help books. In this ill-functioning family networking space, home becomes a reminder of unresolved and overwhelming family dynamics for the Lees rather than a place of solace in that all family members sacrifice their autonomy or individuality to keep a fragile family cohesiveness. Lydia's pseudo self is thus built. She takes her parents' values and expectations as her goal, sacrificing her individuality to become her parents' dream daughter. Bowen summarized that those individuals with less differentiation of self often suffer from mental illness or physical maladies. Eventually, the stressful life is so intense that Lydia has been pushed to act rebelliously in secret.

On the contrary, *Little Fires Everywhere* is dealing with the dilemma of disengagement, meaning that "members of disengaged families may function separately and autonomously but with little sense of family loyalty. Interpersonal distance

is great, the members frequently lacking the capacity to be interdependent or to request support from others when needed" [1]. Disengaged families are featured with excessively rigid or inflexible boundaries which lead to impermeable barriers between subsystems, so that family members may function separately and autonomously but with little sense of family unity or cohesiveness. In this case, parents and children are unable to cross subsystem boundaries. Therefore, the members of neither subsystem are willing or able to enter into the other's world and personal autonomy may be maintained. In the Richardson household, both children and parents are independent from each other. There is lack of attachment and bonding between family members, especially with Izzy. Living in such a strictly ruled community and family, it seems that Izzy is the only rule-breaker in her house.

Izzy, at ten, had been apprehended sneaking into the Humane Society in an attempt to free all the stray cats...At eleven, her mother—convinced that Izzy was overly clumsy—had enrolled her in dance classes to improve her coordination...Every class, Izzy sat down on the floor and refused to move. For the recital—with the aid of a mirror and a Sharpie—Izzy had written NOT YOUR PUPPET across her forehead and cheeks just before taking the stage, where she stood stock-still while the others, disconcerted, danced around her." [6]

Unlike Lydia, Izzy as a rebellious girl has been searching for her own individuality and self-esteem from the beginning to the end of the story. Izzy's feeling of living in such a family is expressed in her monologue before her runaway, "All her life she'd felt hard and angry; her mother always criticizing her, Lexie and Trip always mocking her" [6]. She is clearly aware of the surrounding she lives in. When reading the poem "DO I DARE DISTURB THE UNIVERSE?", she instantly thinks of her mother, her older siblings, and everyone like them, "which to Izzy felt like everyone" [6], who turn a blind eye to the imperfection, the inequality and irony of community they set in. Izzy's awareness of differentiation begins with her resistance to construct pseudo self, which proves that she has higher level of self-differentiation than Lydia at the initial stage. Izzy's road to self-differentiation is also tough and mainly influenced by her ideal idol, Mia Warren, who possesses well-differentiated personality. Therefore, her process can be divided into three phases by two timings of Mia's arrival and departure.

It can be seen that two subsystems influencing Izzy's differentiation are the sibling subsystem and mother-daughter subsystem. In the sibling subsystem, Lexie and Trip always accuse Izzy with mean words and treat her with despise, which can be seen in Moody's narration, that "Lexie and Trip treated Izzy as if she were a dog that might go rabid at any minute, but the two of them had always gotten along" [6]. In Lexie's words, "it was vintage Izzy: freak out for no reason, do something crazy, learn nothing from it" [6]. Moody is most close to Izzy of her siblings, so Izzy feels a sense of betrayal and heartbreak when she finds that Moody has no difference from other members in her hypocritical family, which also contributes to her last choice of catching fire to run away.

"I cannot believe you.' Izzy had never seen her brother act this way. Moody, who had always been the most thoughtful person in her family; Moody, who had always taken her side even if she chose not to take his advice. Moody, the person in her family she'd always trusted to see things more clearly than she could". [6].

In the parent-child subsystem, communication in disengaged families is strained and guarded, and the family's protective functions are limited. When an individual family member is under stress, he or she hardly seems to look up, offer emotional support, or even respond at all. Clearly defined boundaries between subsystems within a family help maintain separateness and at the same time emphasize belongingness to the overall family system.

Families are "living, ongoing entities, organized wholes with members in a continuous, interactive, patterned relationship with one another extending over time and space" [1]. A change in any one component inevitably is associated with changes in other components with which it is in relation. Differentiation of self testifies the ability to adhere to one's own principles and stay goal-driven regardless of any change. When children reach adolescence, the family faces new organizational challenges, particularly around autonomy and independence. Lydia and Izzy, who are at the age of teenager, aspire to constructing their own values and goals to reach adulthood. After reviewing their differentiation process, we can better understand those important timings and their changes. As Bowen supposes, a person's level of differentiation greatly affects his or her major life choices. In the meantime, we can also feel their confusion and efforts to be a well-differentiated adult.

4. SUBURB AND MASS MEDIA: PUBLIC SPACE AS MAINSTREAM DISCOURSE

Family systems theory has been criticized by sociologists and feminists at the early age in that theorists underscored the contextual nature of family functioning: not only are the lives of family members interconnected, but the family's structure and processes are themselves embedded in complex extended family, neighborhood as well as institutional, class, ethnic and cultural systems. For instance, class determines how many options, opportunities, and privileges are open to family members, just as Rank contends that.

Just as family therapy often applies a systemic approach to understanding family dynamics, so too must we appreciate that the family is shaped by its hierarchical position in the system we call socioeconomic status" [11].

In Celeste Ng's two novels, several space images like suburb and school are provided to show the discrimination against those are outcast from the mainstream society. Celeste Ng sets *Everything I Never Told You* in a fictional community called Middlewood, in suburban Ohio, which is a predominantly white community during the 1970s. Middlewood is narrow, conservative and full of prejudice, which is like Winesburg town in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. The setting allows the reader to understand the complex experiences of the different members of the Lee family in that the Supreme Court only reversed the ban on interracial marriage in 1967 when the Supreme Court of the United States abolished a law in Virginia. The mix-raced Lee family is marginalized with few friends, and they could not integrate into the local white community no matter how hard they tried. So both the father James and the children are made to feel like social outcasts. Therefore, their family structure and functioning as well as family dynamics are deeply influenced and changed by the dominant discourse.

Lydia and Nath were the only Asian kids in their community until Hannah's birth. Nath is often the victim of his playmate's racial harassment and is unable to blend in. Lydia also feels an added sense of pressure. Lydia talks to Jack about the feeling to be the only Asian kids in the community, saying,

Sometimes you almost forgot: that you didn't look like everyone else... And then sometimes you noticed the girl across the aisle watching, the pharmacist watching, the checkout boy watching,

and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous... You saw it in the little boys on the playground, stretching their eyes to slits with their fingers — Chinese — Japanese — look at these — and in the older boys who muttered ching chong ching chong ching as they passed you on the street, just loud enough for you to hear". [10].

These experiences isolate the Lee children from all other members of their family, and no friends or activities outside their family distract them from loneliness and pressure imposed by their parents, therefore they are deeply dependent on each other. Preferring togetherness to individuality, Lydia and Nath form the low level of self-differentiation.

Likewise, Shaker Heights, Ohio, the real town in which *Little Fires Everywhere* is set, was "one of the very first planned communities in the nation" [6]. Shaker Heights is a largely affluent community, as Celeste Ng describes it.

"Shaker Heights had been founded, if not on Shaker principles, with the same idea of creating a utopia. Order—and regulation, the father of order—had been the Shakers' key to harmony". [6].

The goal of Shaker Heights is perfection. In Izzy's eyes, everyone is so similar. They are "so concerned about wearing the right things, saying the right things, being friends with the right people" [6]. No one sees race, inequality or mistakes here, even the teenagers in the community could "feel the drive for perfection still in the air" [6]. However, the suburb shows an irony. Although "no one sees race here" [6] in Lexie's eyes, the fact is that "everyone sees race, the only difference is who pretends not to" in Moody's eyes. The black girl in orchestra is insulted by her teacher in sarcastic tone with racial discrimination, and her black parents are always alone in the concert. "Although "in Shaker, high schoolers did not have babies. They took AP classes; they went to college" [6], the eldest Richardson child Lexie gets accidental pregnancy and secretly induces abortion. Mrs. Richardson is the character who most embodies this commitment to order and regulation. She was born and raised in Shaker, she has been told all her life that there is tremendous value in following rules and sticking to the status quo. Based on the multigenerational transmission process, her family is also immersed in her rules and values and subject to her attempts at total control. However, living between the paradoxical world, Izzy is stuck in a predicament of self-identity and self-differentiation.

Besides, mass media plays a great role in shaping their self. The initial purpose of mass media is to transmit information, but it is sometimes misunderstood as a synonym for mainstream media because of its point of view and content. In Celeste Ng's depiction, mass media like newspaper and television are the symbols of mainstream voice, which gives a glimpse of the social and historical context at that time. In *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng described the social and cultural environment of the Lee family and the views of the mainstream society on Chinese-American families through newspaper reports and neighborhood speeches, and revealed the inevitability of the tragedy of the Lee family from the social level. After Lydia's body found in the lake, her death instantly becomes a talk in the neighborhood. The local newspaper has been tracking reports on Lydia's death. "For the past week, ever since the police dragged the lake, the headlines in the Middlewood Monitor have all been about Lydia. Oriental Girl Found Drowned in Pond" [10]. The word oriental appears in every headline to attract attention and curiosity of the public and instantly points out the particularity of the victim.

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Elena Richardson is a reporter at the Sun Press, "a small paper focused on local news" [6]. She has been committed to be journalist because "they reveal truths and information that the public deserves to know, and they provide a record for posterity, so that future generations can learn from our mistakes and improve upon our achievements" [6]. The mission of a journalist in Elena's mind is to convey what the public or the majority should know rather than the truth, which further proves the irony of Shaker Heights belief. Despite having grown up in an orderly community and within a strict family, the Richardson children invite disorder into their lives, Lexie with accidental pregnancy and abortion and Trip with a title of womanizer. Another phenomenon reflecting the paradox of this community and the Richardsons is the daily routine of watching the Jerry Springer Show. Almost every afternoon after school, the Richardson children, except for Izzy, gather on their family's sofa to watch *The Jerry Springer Show* together. They are fascinated by the disruption of order and authority that they see on the show, which demonstrates that they are attracted to chaos. The Richardsons have been ruled by strict rules and careful regulations, and the iconic television program whose popularity at a fever pitch in the late 1990s, provides the

Richardson brood with a heady glimpse into chaos, scandal, and the lurid lives of others, far from Shaker Heights. The show symbolizes both the desire to peer into the lives of others and the fear of finding what's actually there. The Richardsons are insulated from the world by their wealth and privilege, and by the careful order that governs Shaker Heights. While Lexie and Trip pretend to appear orderly, Izzy is openly accompanied with disorder, since she finds the regulations of her family and community to be harmful and hypocritical. She is sick of the hypocrisy and regulation in her surroundings; she is desperate to escape from her current turmoil. However, she has no idea what is the right way to become a mentally accomplished adult, and has been wandering in confusion with the rebellious performance. Her rebellion ranges from the purely symbolic ones, such as refusing to wear dress like other girls and participate in the dance recital, to the outright destructive ones, such as setting the house on fire. This complex mingling of order and disorder in the Richardson children embodies their uncertainty about who they are, suggesting that they are wandering between pseudo self and true self. Compared with Lexie and Trip, Izzy is apparently more-differentiated in that she has the courage to confront reality. However, she is still confined to the family predicament and tries to cut off the ties with her developmental environment.

5. RUNAWAY: THE POSSIBILITIES OF SELF-DIFFERENTIATION

Lydia and Izzy end their differentiation of self with death and runaway respectively, which actually share the common essence called emotional cutoff. In Bowen's theory, cutting oneself off emotionally from one's family of origin often represents a desperate effort to deal with unresolved fusion with family members, which is typically manifested by withdrawing or running away from the family of origin [4]. In terms of emotional growth, both heroines have achieved successful transformation.

Celeste Ng depicts an obedient and silent girl Lydia with extremely low level of self-differentiation who can sacrifice her total individuality to meet others' needs and to assimilate into the family togetherness. Poor-differentiated persons are those whose lives are dominated by the automatic emotional system. They are less flexible, less adaptable, and more emotionally dependent on the surrounding, therefore, they are easily stressed

into anxiety and dysfunction. It is obvious that Lydia's perception of self is fully dependent on others' expectations. For the improvement of her self-differentiation, she drowns herself in the lake. Just like the image of water, she is calm and gentle. She pays her own price for growing without hurting others. Unlike Lydia, Izzy is in the midrange differentiation. More specifically, such people have definite beliefs and values but tend to be over concerned with the opinions of others and may make decisions based on emotional reactivity, especially when uncertain whether the decisions may receive disapproval from significant others. She is brutal, rebellious and bold enough to destroy everything. "From early childhood, Izzy had been fiercely, stubbornly independent; she refused to ask for help with anything" [6]. She has a higher level of self-differentiation and her transformation is a truly success, because she does not pay any price. Being different from people around her, she cares less about other' opinions and has always been pursuing her own individuality.

Lydia's death by drowning is an allegory for the pain and suffering that children can experience within their families. During the time leading up to Lydia's death, it is clear that she was "drowning" in a more symbolic sense. Lydia felt weighed down by the social and academic pressures placed on her. Although she enters the lake in order to start anew, her inability to swim indicates how she ultimately cannot escape the pressures of her life. There is also a connection between this isolation and the metaphorical concept of "drowning." Shortly before her death, Lydia remembers that Nath "has always kept her afloat" [10]. Now that he is about to go to Harvard, she worries that she will permanently "sink" under the pressure of her parents' suffocating attention and expectations. In reality, this fear leads Lydia to drown in the literal sense. A bright symbol of water is also found in the novel. "There were no clouds, and in the sun, the water had looked almost white, like a puddle of milk" [10]. The motif of water is central to *Everything I Never Told You*. Though water is often described with negative connotations of darkness and obscurity, here, in an innocent moment when Lydia, Hannah, and Nath are relaxing by the lake, the water takes on a calm and peaceful quality, evoking nourishment and purity.

Fire is actually everywhere throughout the novel *Little Fires Everywhere*. It is in the book's title, and a mysterious fire is the plot's first major event, placed at the beginning of the first chapter and used as a framing device for the rest of the

book. It is found that the image of fire is connected to metaphors of "holy spirit", "ruin", "salvation", "revenge", "passion" and "human nature" in western literary works. Fire, again and again, serves as a metaphor for renewal. Mia knows that Izzy is going through the phase of uncertainty and confusion. She encourages Izzy to control the surrounding, to do something to change her circumstances. "Sometimes, just when you think everything's gone, you find a way" [6], Mia Warren tells Izzy Richardson, "Like after a prairie fire" [6]. Mia's words of encouragement echo in her ear as she uses a can of gasoline from the garage to cover each room of the house in accelerant — "Sometimes," Mia told her earlier in the narrative, "you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over. After the burning the soil is richer, and new things can grow" [6]. Inspired by the prospect of renewal, angry at her family for driving the Warrens away, and desperate to regain the sense of acceptance she felt with Mia, Izzy starts a series of "little fires everywhere" throughout her own home, reducing the grand structure to a burnt-out hull before running away, perhaps for good.

6. CONCLUSION

After discussion and analysis, firstly, a panorama of the dysfunctional family system and dominant social discourse where the heroines live in can be seen, and it also reveals a fact that the self-differentiation level is deeply influenced by the family of origin and the mainstream environment, thus discussing the possibility to reconstruct self under the double shackles for individuals. Furthermore, it can be known that the process of self-differentiation is the personal growth from dependence and togetherness to independence and individuality. Lydia lives in an enmeshed family and Izzy in a disengaged family. Apart from their respective families, their community or neighborhood also imposes an influence on the low level of self-differentiation. Thus, Lydia Lee is such a typical poor-differentiated character that she is always fearful and emotionally needy, and she sacrifices her individuality in order to ensure acceptance from her family. While Izzy Richardson who has been treated with word abuse and indifference from her siblings and has been over-controlled by her rule-embracer mother, is sick of the hypocrisy and regulation in her surroundings, so she is desperate for escape from her current turmoil. However, she has no idea what is the right road to become a mentally accomplished adult, and thus has been wandering from fusion to self-

differentiation. Ultimately, the two novels end with the metaphors of water and fire respectively, indicating the possibility of individuals reconstructing self. Lydia and Izzy end their differentiation of self with runaway — an emotional cutoff, death and arson respectively.

In contemporary Chinese or Asian American Literature, transgressive texts are usually defined from two aspects, "writers' ethnic identity" and "subject or theme of the work" [12]. Self-differentiation is a universal motif that transcends the experience of Chinese Americans, so it belongs to transgressive writing in the sense of the theme. Celeste Ng's innovation on traditional themes and transgressive texts in two works resonates with a diverse trend of beyond ethnicity in contemporary Chinese American literature.

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