

Trauma Narrative Research in Everything I Never Told You

Yu Zhang

Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou 450007, China.

Abstract: Celeste Ng is one of the most representative Chinese American writers in the contemporary Chinese American literary world. The dual identities of Chinese and Americans give Celeste Ng's poetry a unique perspective on the problems of Chinese American family and cultural identity. Everything I Never Told You is Celeste Ng's first novel, which took six years to complete. It is also the first literary work focusing on cross-ethnic Chinese American families. The novel takes the disappearance of the youngest daughter Lydia as the starting point, discusses the various difficulties suffered by the Chinese American families in American society, and reflects the awkward situation of Chinese American families in American mainstream society. This essay intends to analyze the text of the novel based on the trauma theory. Firstly, it discusses the psychological and emotional trauma suffered by the Chinese American family in Everything I Never Told You. Secondly, it analyzes the causes of the family trauma. And finally, this essay discusses the healing process of the family. For Chinese families, psychological trauma is the external reaction of social pressure and family contradictions. Only by establishing a harmonious relationship between family members and facing the painful memories, can we get out of the trauma and build a harmonious family and society.

Keywords: Everything I Never Told You; Traumatic Narration; Racial discrimination

1. Introduction

1.1 Everything I Never Told You and Celeste Ng

Celeste Ng is the author of the book Everything I Never Told You, and she grew up in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Celeste Ng was born in a scientist family, which is the second generation of Hong Kong immigrants. She was admitted to Harvard University and received a master of Arts degree from the University of Michigan. During her university, she won the Hopwood award. Her novels and essays have appeared in literary journals such as One Story, The Third Quarterly and Bellevue Literary Review. Her Chinese identity enables her to pay close attention on the living conditions of Chinese Americans and to reveal their psychological world. It took her six years to write her first novel, Everything I Never Told You. The book was highly acclaimed upon publication, becoming the most influential art work of 2014, and it not only became a New York Times bestseller, but also won numerous media awards, including the 2014 Amazon Bestseller Award. In the novel, Celeste Ng tells the story of a Chinese American family living in the United States in the 1970s. As we read her book, we can gradually learn the secrets of this Chinese American family that is slowly tearing it apart. From her novels and speeches, readers can explore cultural identity, feminism, and the difficulties faced by interracial families.

1.2 Trauma Theory

The word "trauma" originally came from Greek, meaning "skin scar". As a popular knowledge discourse and research paradigm, it originated from clinical medicine related to industrial accident trauma in Victorian England in the 19th century and modern psychology at the end of the 19th century. By the late 20th century, after more than 100 years of exploration, trauma theory had gradually developed into an interdisciplinary theory, which penetrated into the fields of literature, philosophy, history, cultural research, anthropology, sociology and so on. Its research focuses on the vulnerable groups in

society, such as women, children, ethnic minorities, ethnic groups and marginalized groups excluded by mainstream cultural norms.

If you encounter trauma, you must find an effective way to recover from trauma. It can be seen that how to repair traumatic memory plays a vital role in healing trauma. The solution offered by most critics or psychologists is to go back to the narrative, to encourage victims to face the traumatic experience in the past by means of “telling”, so that the traumatic memory can be transformed into a normal memory.

2. Traumatic Narration in Everything I Never Told You

2.1 Lydia’s Severe Trauma

Lydia, the heroine of the novel *Everything I Never Told You*, has always been an existence that readers cannot ignore. The author told readers at the beginning of the novel, “Lydia is dead, but they don’t know yet.” Then they launched a series of tracking around Lydia’s death. As the story unfolds, we will gradually find that Lydia’s trauma mainly comes from the family environment, that is, the event of being abandoned by her mother when she was young has left Lydia with psychological trauma that is difficult to heal.

When Lydia was five years old, her mother ran away from home without any sign, but the young Lydia didn’t know what to do. She just felt that something important had happened at home. During the time when her mother disappeared, Lydia’s world also changed drastically: at school, classmates would gossip her, and teachers would cast sympathetic glances at her and her brother; when she woke up early in the morning. “She stared at the TV silently and her eyes became more and more dull.” At night, Lydia would also have uncontrollable nightmares of spiders and snakes, dreams of her drowning in a teacup.

Trauma is not necessarily caused by some destructive and sudden trauma events, such as violence, war, rape, etc., but also by long-term continuous unpleasant factors in daily life. The long absence of maternal love made Lydia’s childhood form a melancholy and uneasy psychological state.

2.2 James’s Childhood Trauma

James, one of the heroes of the novel, is a typical second-generation Chinese immigrant. His childhood trauma mainly caused by the social environment. Although he was born in the United States and is a legal citizen of the United States, however, the United States has never really opened its arms to him. This made James, who lived in a dual cultural background since childhood, suffer from identity crisis all the time. His childhood was full of loneliness and inferiority complex, which had a significant impact on his growth and life.

At a young age, James deeply felt all kinds of explicit and implicit colonial discrimination of Chinese Americans in American society. This unfair treatment made young James doubt his national characteristics and feel inferior and anxious. This “different” psychological pressure forced him to strive to cater to the mainstream culture of the United States, which is also a concrete manifestation of inner trauma. (Guirong Li, 2010) However, no matter how hard he tried, he could not become a real “American” and was always excluded. As the second generation of Chinese Americans, when James’s personality is not yet fully mature, he had to face all kinds of pressure from American mainstream society and racism, which undoubtedly caused indelible psychological and emotional trauma to James in his childhood and made him suffer from loneliness throughout his childhood.

3. Trauma Repair

3.1 Lydia’s Resistance and Destruction

Parents control Lydia’s life in the name of love. Even if Lydia doesn’t like it or even hates it, even if she doesn’t understand the different educational ideas between her mother and her father, Lydia, who carries her parents’ dreams, still

tries to cater to her. Her apparent obedience and cleverness brought her great pain. Psychological trauma caused Lydia to be sensitive and introverted.

Lydia's struggle is not limited to perfunctory tasks assigned by her parents, but also in socializing with others. She started to getting in touch with the bad boys, and always hanging out with Jack. To Lydia's surprise, Jack, who was seen as a punk in the eyes of others, became her listener instead. Scholar Mike White and David Epston first proposed "telling therapy" based on clinical experience, and it has become a widely concerned treatment method. Through listening, Jack becomes Lydia's trauma witness, prompting Lydia to tell about her trauma; by telling, Lydia's anxiety is relieved to a certain extent, and the traumatic experience becomes a life experience.

Without the company of her classmates and the listening of Jack, Lydia is constantly tortured by traumatic experience and the guilt of cheating her parents. As Nath left, the communication between brother and sister gradually decreased. Lydia, who lacked communication objects, could not resolve her emotions, her psychological trauma could not be cured, and she finally went to destruction.

3.2 James's Return and Healing

James, who is caught between Chinese and American cultures, has been treated unfairly because of his ethnic identity. The traumatic event made James lose his self-identity and feel very low self-esteem. Filled with fears of being marginalized from society, James is desperate for the approval of others. Therefore, he tried to cater to white people, trying to win the respect of society and heal the psychological trauma through his own efforts.

On the one hand, James studied hard. Although the courses were difficult, he still obtained a doctorate degree with excellent grades. He hoped to stay in Harvard to teach by virtue of his excellent performance. In order to prove that he is no different from white people, he took the initiative to court American culture. Although he is Chinese, his major is American history. James' performance is excellent, and the department head has repeatedly suggested that his grades are good enough. However, only because of the "inappropriate" skin color, James was eventually not accepted by Harvard.

On the other hand, James tried to narrow his distance from the mainstream society of the United States through his marriage with white women. Obviously, the reason why James is flattered by Marilyn's pursuit is not only because of Marilyn's personal charisma, but also because of her white identity. James intends to put his family photos on the desk to show off his white wife. It seems that the praise and blessing of others can prove that they have really integrated into American society. However, in fact, the combination of such mixed nation families makes the family "different". (Xin Wang, 2013)

4. Conclusion

In short, the two clues of Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* is parallel. One clue mainly presents James's racial trauma, Marilyn's gender trauma and Lydia's family trauma, that is, the traumatic experience of this multi-ethnic family. The other shows the fighting process of the characters, that is, the healing journey of the family. It can be said that this is not only the traumatic experience of Lydia's family, but also the story of many mixed race families. Through trauma narrative intent, the author points out that trauma witnessing, including telling and listening, is an effective way to heal trauma, and love from family is the key to healing multi-racial family members' trauma, and can prevent post-traumatic memories from being transmitted across generations to future generations. This has important enlightenment and practical significance for solving social problems such as inter-generational conflicts, immigration, and gender in today's globalization era.

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