

Maternal Love as Narcissistic Deprivation: On the Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Everything I Never Told You*

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Abstract

In Celeste Ng's debut novel *Everything I Never Told You*, both the two generations' mother-daughter relationships witness the maternal use of the daughter as "obscure maternal double", as the daughter unwittingly suffers from the mother's narcissistic deprivation in the name of maternal love. This thesis attempts to illustrate that the profound shaping motivation of the daughter's tragedy lies in the mother's desire and practice of power-participation in a patriarchal society. Under the phallogocentric culture that strangles female voice, the mother-figure establishes identity and gains authority by materializing her daughter as a receptive vase, strangling her development of an autonomous sense of self through the operation of doll complex and symbiotic illusion. This traps her into a dualistic power paradigm, which makes her voluntarily or subconsciously play the role of a maintainer and a conspirator to patriarchy, and this power-operation mode bears great generational continuity from mothers to daughters.

Key words: Celeste Ng; *Everything I Never Told You*; Mother-daughter relationship

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INTRODUCTION

Everything I Never Told You (2014), Celeste Ng (1980-)’s debut novel and also a phenomenal success, is about the crisis and tragedy of a biracial Chinese-American family in the 1970s. Beginning with the unexpected death of the most favored daughter Lydia, it gradually unveils all the family members’ sufferings of being “the other”. Related international studies pay special attention to its major themes of identity crisis, bicultural dilemma and ethnic tensions with the approaches of post-colonialism or psychoanalysis theory. A majority of them end up with blaming the direct oppression of patriarchal society on females, that of white society on non-whites, and that of parental expectations on children for the family’s disintegration and agony. To probe into the origin of the tragedy, an easily overlooked yet essential point in this work is the asymmetric mother-daughter relationship whose significance is well recognized by feminist theorists (Crew, p.2). As a daughter, Marilyn refuses the life constrained by her mother, yet conversely constrains her daughter’s life and finally hastens her death. By analyzing the maternal love’s modality, operation and the essence of its projection, this thesis attempts to illustrate that, in *Everything I Never Told You*, the profound shaping motivation of the daughter’s tragedy in a mother-daughter relationship lies in the mother’s desire and practice of power-participation in a patriarchal society. For a mother, giving birth to a girl can give rise to the fantasy of creating a new and better self and provide a sense of “closeness and narcissistic fulfillment” (Kabat, p.256), and the daughter’s experience of “finding out what she has always known—that she is her mother’s reflection” is a repeated theme in women’s literature (La Belle, p.80). In *Everything I Never Told You*, both two generations’ mother-daughter relationships witness the maternal

use of the daughter as “obscure maternal double”¹, as the daughter unwittingly suffers from the mother’s narcissistic deprivation in the name of maternal love. In a patriarchal society that strangles female voice, the mother-figure establishes identity and gains authority by materializing her daughter as a receptive vase, strangling her development of an autonomous sense of self through the operation of doll complex and symbiotic illusion. This traps her into a dualistic power paradigm, which makes her voluntarily or subconsciously play the role of a maintainer and a conspirator to patriarchy, and this power-operation mode bears great generational continuity from mothers to daughters.

1. DORIS AND MARILYN: A PATRIARCHY’S MAINTAINER AND A REBELLIOUS DOLL’S RETURN

Though merely consisting of women, the mother-daughter relationship itself isn’t naturally an antagonistic force of phallogocentrism but can conversely become an accomplice. Blain points out that daughters can not have such unmediated link with their mothers under patriarchy as sons with their fathers, and a mother-daughter model implies “the mediation (and legitimation) by men as fathers linking the generations” (p.225). The relationship among women is governed either by “rivalry for the possession of the ‘male organ’” or by “identification with the man” (Irigaray, *This*, p.69). Hence, no mother-daughter relationship can escape from a masculine influence, and the mother-daughter relationship formed by females who internalize patriarchal ideology is essentially a defender and inheritor of patriarchal oppression.

Doris is, first, a traditional “moral angel” disciplined by patriarchy, who perfectly performs her gender role as a good wife and a good mother. The Betty Crocker Cookbook, full of approaches of pleasing a man through cooking, is the only thing that shows the trace of her existence. She shoulders all the daily chores and takes good care of her daughter alone: she “never sent her daughter (Marilyn) to school without a hot breakfast” (Ng, p.17)².

Doris is, besides, a patriarchy’s advocate and maintainer for her desire and practice of power-gaining. According to Beauvoir, if a woman want to “succeed in establishing herself as subject”, she would “invent equivalents of the phallus” which assumes much worth for its symbolization of a dominance exercised in other domains, and a doll can “become a possession more

precious than the penis” (p.74). Therefore, Doris expects her daughter Marilyn to be a doll, a foreign object to serve her as “alter ego and a substitute for that double, that natural plaything: the penis” (Beauvoir, p.283). Internalizing traditional social division, Doris spends her whole life trying to “turn Marilyn into the type” (p.141) which tightly bound to family and marriage. She always emphasizes the importance of housekeeping for a young lady, and when Marilyn earns a scholarship to Radcliffe, Doris’ pride of her lies in, instead of her own career prospects, her further opportunity of “meeting a lot of wonderful Harvard men” (17). In addition, the process of Doris’ power-exertion is at her husband’s absence: she “never mentioned Marilyn’s father after he left, but raised her alone” (ibid.). According to theory of psychoanalytic feminism, Doris is a phallic mother, being simultaneously both a man and a woman. In this context, the mother-child dyad won’t become a triad, and the child’s oedipal phase or triangulation can not be achieved adequately. In Doris’ expectation, her only blood Marilyn should inevitably be a docile doll subordinated to her arrangement and finally becomes her double as a conventional housewife. In this sense, Doris, though being a female, is a maintainer of the male-dominated order and fuels the production of submissive females disciplined and oppressed by patriarchy.

However, that her daughter refuses her planning frustrates her a lot. For a mother, her daughter is a critical carrier for her identity-construction. As the daughter disappears, the mother’s identity disappears thereupon. Marilyn’s leaving and rupture is a great threat to Doris’ motherhood, so she needs a new doll-image, which must be silent and receptive, to control, thus protecting her status in patriarchal culture. When Marilyn sorts out her mother’s things after her death, she finds “the same china cabinet full of her mother’s dolls, whose unblinking eyes gave her the same cold” (p.22). Her mother “had loved her doll collection, but their faces were blank as chalk, white china masks under horsehair wigs. Little strangers with cold stares” (ibid.). These dolls, all receptive vases without emotions or opinions, are substitutes for Marilyn, which shows that Doris never wants to give up her pursuing of the sense of self-worth and authority.

Contrastively, Marilyn seems to be quite a new woman. Disapproving her mother’s subordination and limited choice, she does her utmost to avoid Doris’ mode of conventional femininity. As a brilliant top student, she proves with her actions that females are not inferior to males: “Her results were the most accurate; her lab reports the most complete. By midterm, she set the curve for every exam, and the instructor had stopped smirking” (p.161). She has always longed for difference and distinction. All of her conducts, her request to take shop instead of home ec, her marriage to the Asian-American James, her dream of being a doctor, which is “the furthest thing she

¹ This concept is first put forward by Suzanne Juhasz in his paper “Towards Recognition-Writing and the Daughter-Mother Relationship.” (p.286)

² The following contents cited from *Everything I Never Told You* are all referenced by page numbers.

could imagine from her mother's life" (p.18), show her determination to discard her mother's living-framework and gain her self-value as an independent and competent female: "Never, she promised herself. I will never end up like that" (p.49). Mother and daughter are then "estranged by patriarchal norms for female behavior and self-identity" (Rosinsky, p.280). However, the male-dominated society's exclusion ultimately drives Marilyn to duplicate her mother's path of "normal femininity". With her career prospects forfeited, she ultimately becomes a traditional housewife, living "the life her mother had hoped to lead herself: husband, children, house, her sole job to keep it all in order...There was nothing more her mother could have wished her" (p.44). The disillusionment of her own dream and ambition makes her life a failed attempt, and its origin is partly her mother's disciplinary and assimilative influence.

To sum up, it can be seen from the life experience of Doris and Marilyn that a mother-daughter relationship, though consisting of solely females, can become a maintainer of patriarchal order and the root of oppression as the mother voluntarily keeps her identity code as a moral angel and acquires power through regarding her daughter as a doll and assimilating her into the traditional gender role. Even if there is resistance, the mother's experience with her femininity has so enormous an influence on the daughter that it will finally induce similar patterns, and the rebellious daughter is destined to return to her family. In this sense, it can be concluded that Marilyn's tragedy largely springs from her mother Doris who voluntarily guards and operates the patriarchal rules.

2. MARILYN AND LYDIA: A PATRIARCHY'S ACCOMPLICE AND A DOCILE DOLL'S DEATH

According to Freud, on account of open borders and female lineage between mothers and daughters, styles of mothering and motherhood are transmitted from generation to generation in the patterns of repetition compulsion (p.3). Marilyn, being both a daughter and a mother, is an essential connection between the two generations. Through her, the female desire and performance of power-participation are transferred to the subsequent generation, and the mother and daughter's being shackled to one another is also transmitted as the daughter herself becomes a mother.

As what Judith Jordan notes, a mother has the tendency to identify more and build a more connected affective relation with her daughter than with her son since "the daughter may be experienced by the mother as providing a closer reflection of the mother than does the son" (p.33). A mother is "both her daughter's prop and stay" and the one who "stands in the way of the girl's

independence, with all the reproaches and rancour this entails" (Freud, p.151). Lydia, Marilyn's elder daughter, "so fussed over, so carefully tended, like a prize flower", is "the one perpetually on their mother's mind" (pp.64-65), and "the daughter she thinks of first and always" (p.33) who she would see last. It is not only because she owns a similar appearance with her mother, but also an accordant soul as Marilyn expects, which makes her a perfect seed to become her alter ego.

Marilyn needs such an alter ego to fulfill her self-worth. Her passive acceptance of patriarchal expectation declares the bankrupt of females' social power-participation, so her desire of constructing identity and establishing authority turns to the field of domesticity: "the family has always been the privileged locus of women's exploitation" (Irigaray, *This*, p.142). Fed up with her mother's arranging, Marilyn promises that she would never shunt her daughter toward domesticity: "She would spend the rest of her years guiding Lydia, sheltering her, the way you tended a prize rose: helping it grow, propping it with stakes, arching each stem toward perfection" (p.84). Experienced as providing perfect protection, Marilyn's excessive love accidentally leads to overprotection, possession and domination. Lydia, in her eyes, is precisely a prize rose, a doll to be arbitrarily dressed, and an obscure maternal double that bears the continuity of her dream.

In daily life, Marilyn controls her daughter in everything no matter how trivial it is. She forbids Lydia from going out until she'd finished all her schoolwork, prohibits her from going out with boys, persuades her to skip Cat Malone's birthday party to finish her science fair project, and even prevents her from listening to music when she's studying. Her meddling in all her daughter's affairs reflects her symbiotic illusion, which is, by Freud's definition, "the mutual psychological involvement that leads to extreme interdependence", and "the inseparability of the mother inside the head of the daughter, and vice versa" (p.10). As a matter of a dyad, a duo chained and addicted to each other (Freud, p.11), it is more an oppressive interaction than an affectionate aggregation. It contains the principle that the mother provides the child with love on condition that he or she surrenders to her wishes (ibid.). On major issues, Marilyn naturally owns *carte blanche*. She considers her daughter as an irreplaceable extension of herself, expecting that all her yearnings, aspirations, and unfulfilled dreams will be met by her. On the surface, she encourages Lydia to do whatever she wants, but she actually imposes her own dream of becoming a doctor upon Lydia and is always in blind confidence that it is Lydia's own choice: "since childhood, Lydia had wanted to be a doctor, just as her mother once had" (p.42). What she has already planned for her future is Lydia's only way out: "All her (Lydia's) life she had heard her mother's heart drumming one beat:

doctor, doctor, doctor. She wanted this so much...Lydia could not imagine another future, another life” (ibid.).

Marilyn’s maternal love is essentially despotic and narcissistic. Erich Fromm finds the narcissistic element in motherly love and notices a motivation in a mother’s wish for power, or possession: “the child, being helpless and completely subject to her will, is a natural object of satisfaction for a domineering and possessive woman” (p.58). This narcissism of love is not only confined to her forcing Lydia to do what she personally wants, but also manifested in her indifference to Lydia’s true feelings as an individual. She misses bountiful monumental moments in Lydia’s growth without taking it seriously. Later she repeatedly misreads Lydia’s words and deeds, insisting that she fully understands her daughter: “Lydia has never really had friends, but their parents have never known” (p.9). Even after Lydia’s death, when Officer Fiske asks if Lydia is a lonely child, Marilyn merely mechanically repeats that “she was so busy...worked very hard... she was very smart” (p.62); when asked if Lydia seems sad, she still firmly believes that Lydia is very happy. She never sincerely listens to her daughter’s inner voice, but creates and defends her own identity at the expense of Lydia’s personal autonomy by domesticating, constricting and controlling her. The absolute control provides her with a sense of authority which psychologically convinces her of an equal position with males. Lydia is subsequently objectified to be a tool that maintains her psychic equilibrium and sinks into a burdensome parasitic relationship. This dualistic power paradigm is essentially patriarchal and regresses to gender antagonism, and the internalization of which reflects female’s ambivalence. On the one hand, their striving for power-participation demonstrates their will of independence, while on the other hand, this desire to enter the traditional male world precisely reflects female mentality of gaining male approbation. The sphere of mother-daughter relationships, in this sense, “invalidates all those straightforward claims to equality between the sexes” (Irigaray, *I*, p.47).

As a strongly narcissistic bond, the symbiotic illusion serves to keep the mother’s vulnerable sense of self-worth intact as much as possible (Freud, p.11), but this quasi-intimacy, “without boundaries where any separation is disavowed” (Freud, p.25), is detrimental to the daughter’s further development of separation, autonomy and individuation. As Alice Miller claims, the childhood may suffer from the parent’s narcissistic deprivation as the parent exploits it to remedy the early deficits, and in response, the child develops “an amazing ability to perceive and respond intuitively, that is, unconsciously, to this need of the mother, or of both parents, for him to take on the role that had unconsciously been assigned to him” (p.8) and then become “(the confidantes, comforters, advisors, supporters) of their own mothers” (pp.8-9).

Landed in a thorny dilemma, Lydia is fear of being either appropriated or abandoned by her mother, which leads to “a reinforced tendency to suppress her own aggression and to premature, excessive adaptation” (Freud, p.106). Understanding that her free will would disturb the balance of indispensable symbiotic duality, she chooses to always smile, always be so eager to please her mother: “Sure, Mom. I’d love to, Mom” (p.67). The day when Lydia is blocked up with collapsing issues of the necklace, the boys in front of the car, the test, and Louisa, “something within her tipped and cracked” (p.137), but she still forces herself to smile like a doll: “she sat bolt upright with that same fake smile at the dinner table, like a doll on display, but only Hannah spotted its fakeness”, “the smile was too wide, too bright, cheery and white-toothed and fake” (ibid.). This fake smile, a doll’s smile, is in line with Marilyn’s, which is also managed as facing her mother: “Marilyn smiled back, a fake smile, the same one she had given to her mother all those years” (p.56). The difference is that Lydia is wholeheartedly willing to perform the role of a doll. The origin of Lydia’s obedience is the trauma caused by Marilyn’s unexpected disappearance. She believes that her mother’s leaving is her and her brother’s fault that they haven’t been what she wanted. Consequently, she keeps the promise that as long as her mother comes back and stays, she would “do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted” (p.78). In accordance with fateful struggle of Electra, the paradigm for conflicts in female development, Lydia conceals her resentment and turns it against herself. She swallows the bitterness and never speaks it out—she has nowhere to unbosom herself. It is because Lydia, as a doll of her mother, doesn’t have a doll herself, that she can’t find a foothold and lose her identity, which finally results in her death.

To sum up, the daughter, even as an adult, may well impose on others, especially her own daughter, her need for affirmation and approval (Fellman, p.540). As she becomes a mother from a daughter, Marilyn subconsciously projects her restricted past onto her daughter. Under her arranging and controlling, which sinks into dualistic power paradigm of patriarchy, Lydia acquires an unaccomplished self-differentiation and fails to achieve a positive self-image, self-recognition and self-agency. She merely serves as a doll to meet her mother’s narcissistic needs, and her loss of subjectivity finally deteriorates to her loss of the right of existence. In this sense, Lydia’s tragedy largely springs from her mother Marilyn who unconsciously plays the role of a phallogocentrism’s conspirator.

CONCLUSION

For a woman, the inner bond with the mother can be a source both of strength and of frustration. Keeping

mirroring themselves in each other, mothers and daughters are always ambivalently attached to one another, and the interacting and influence will be transferred to subsequent generations. In conclusion, in the novel *Everything I Never Told You*, the daughter-figures' tragedies primarily come from their mothers. Since the mother's power exists only within a system organized by men, the mother, who seeks for identity, self-value and power by regarding her daughter as an alter ego to meet narcissistic demands, is actually a maintainer or a conspirator of patriarchy. With her sinking into dualistic paradigm in the exercise of power, doll complex and symbiotic illusion that bind them are detrimental to the daughter's own sense of selfhood, self-worth and independence—both Marilyn and Lydia are the victims.

The novel's ending seems pessimistic about the outlet of mother-daughter relationship in a patriarchal system. Marilyn rebels against her mother's expectation of being a doll, but she is not only pushed back to normal femininity but also becomes a paternalistic oppressor who constricts her own daughter. Lydia is willing to play the role of a docile doll for her mother, but when she finally figures it out and tries to recollect her own sense of selfhood, she is drowned in the lake. Returning to conventional social division and becoming patriarchy's conspirator, or realizing the importance of subjectivity but heading to death, seem to be the only two ways for females under phallogocentrism. The mother-daughter relationship reminds woman of their lack of subjective identity, and arouses affects for which there is no corresponding cultural organization, and it is thus one of the areas where it is important to work for the establishment of mediations, of relations between the in-itself and the for-itself for woman. The tragedies demonstrate the significance of the construction of intersubjectivity between mothers and daughters.

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