

Original Paper

Combating Trauma Through a Family Approach in Celeste Ng's

Everything I Never Told You

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Abstract

The novel Everything I Never Told You by contemporary Chinese-American author Celeste Ng portrays the challenges faced by a cross-cultural family consisting of James Lee, a Chinese-American university professor, and his white wife Marilyn, in 1970s America. She explores the intergenerational trauma caused by cultural conflicts. Centered around the death of their daughter Lydia, the novel delves into the intergenerational trauma experienced by the members of this cross-cultural family due to familial and societal conflicts. It also depicts how the family members rebuild trust, reconcile with each other, and heal from their trauma. Through this portrayal, the novel highlights the pressing need, amidst cultural clashes and social transformations, to embrace an inclusive and forward-looking perspective to embrace and adapt to the transformative changes.

Keywords

Intergenerational trauma, Everything I Never Told You, self-redemption; trauma and recovery

1. Introduction

Celeste Ng, a contemporary female writer, is widely recognized for her collection of short stories published in various literary journals. The narrative unfolds in a white middle-class neighborhood in Ohio during the 1970s, a time when the civil rights movement was awakening minority groups' consciousness about their identities and their fight for empowerment. The story revolves around the disappearance and subsequent discovery of Lydia Lee, their middle daughter, in a nearby lake, which triggers a long-standing conflict rooted in intergenerational trauma within the family. The novel delves into the family's past and present, exposing hidden secrets and tensions that had been brewing beneath the surface for years. All the main characters in the novel, who belong to marginalized sections of society, have endured some form of psychological trauma, and Lydia's intergenerational trauma ultimately leads to her tragic demise, serving as a form of self-redemption. According to Ng's belief, Lydia attempted to

repeatedly revisit her most cherished memories in order to cope with her struggles but succumbed to the pressures imposed by society and her family, ultimately choosing to end her own life. To alleviate the distress caused by their marginalized status, James took significant steps to combat the social ostracism associated with it, while Marilyn strived to prove her intellectual and professional capabilities on par with her male colleagues. Unfortunately, their children were unable to find their sense of self or experience redemption due to the impact of their parents' cowardice and traumatic experiences.

As an individual who identifies as an American citizen with Chinese heritage, Ng shares a deep and meaningful emotional connection with Asian culture, which she longs to explore. This fascination is not only rooted in her personal identity but also nurtured by her ancestors' upbringing and the cultivation of cultural awareness. From a young age, Ng immersed herself in the works of Chinese-American authors such as Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston, allowing her to grasp the transformative influence of culture on individuals' lives. In Ng's literary works, her characters stand out from traditional portrayals of Chinese Americans in literature by focusing on their unique stories rather than solely emphasizing their Asian traits. Ng's objective is to challenge stereotypes and initiate conversations about these narratives themselves and their connection to the world around them, encouraging readers to adopt a fresh perspective.

Previous studies on the novel have explored themes of psychological trauma, marginalized writing, and identity crises, often examining the concept of intergenerational trauma. These analyses align with an intersectional feminist approach, which explores trauma among minority family members and aligns with the research direction of this thesis.

2. Theoretical Framework

Considering that the Lee family's trauma stems from psychological factors and requires collective addressing, incorporating psychoanalytic approaches would assist in a more lucid and intuitive examination of the characters' mental well-being and behavioral tendencies. Drawing from psychoanalytic theories, this thesis leverages the insights of Judith Herman and Murray Bowen, whose respective theories have been influential in trauma recovery and the restoration of familial connections.

To begin with, within this thesis, Herman's trauma theory is employed to analyze the development of trauma experienced by the novel's characters and their corresponding behavioral patterns. Judith Herman, an esteemed American psychiatrist and researcher, is renowned for her extensive investigations into trauma and its impact on individuals, notably in her book "Trauma and Recovery" (1992). This work outlines a three-stage model of recovery, involving establishing safety, recounting the traumatic event, and reconnecting with others. Herman's research underscores the importance of comprehending the social and cultural contexts surrounding trauma, particularly in relation to women, including domestic violence, sexual abuse, and human trafficking.

Secondly, Murray Bowen's family systems theory is adopted as a complementary theory to Herman's. Bowen emphasizes understanding the family as a system, where changes in one individual or subsystem

can reverberate throughout the entire family unit. He introduces the concept of family systems dynamics, encompassing patterns and rules that govern family functioning. These dynamics include differentiation of self, triangulation, and emotional fusion. Differentiation of self pertains to an individual's ability to differentiate their thoughts, feelings, and identity from those of their family members. Triangulation occurs when conflict between two individuals involves a third person, further complicating family dynamics. Emotional fusion refers to the level of emotional interconnectedness and enmeshment within the family system. Bowen's theory highlights anxiety as a driving force behind dysfunctional patterns within families. He posits that anxiety and emotional reactivity can propagate within the family system, perpetuating unhealthy communication and behavioral patterns. Bowen's perspective offers an alternative approach to recovering from intergenerational psychological trauma.

Thus, the research framework of this paper is based on Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory and Judith Herman's three-stage recovery process, aiding in the analysis of the formation, expression, and intergenerational transmission of family intergenerational trauma. Although their research focuses differ, both Herman and Bowen's theories emphasize trauma, the subconscious mind, and recovery, with a strong emphasis on the role of unconscious processes, inner conflict, and the significance of psychotherapy. Herman, in particular, places significant importance on the origin of trauma in adults and females, which is valuable for analyzing intergenerational trauma and promoting the self-preservation of the Lee family. This rationale underlies their theories' capacity to provide a comprehensive analysis of the entire process of psychological trauma formation and the Lee family's self-preservation. By combining family systems theory and trauma theory, this thesis aims to achieve a deeper understanding of the characters' psychological states and behavioral patterns in the novel and ultimately propose solutions for healing intergenerational trauma.

3. The Journey towards Post-Traumatic Growth

3.1 Post-Traumatic Growth of James

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory is a psychoanalytic approach that underscores the interconnectedness of family members and the dynamics of their relationships. According to Bowen, individuals are an integral part of a larger emotional system, which is their family, and their behavior is influenced by the emotional patterns and dynamics within this system. One of the core concepts in Bowen's theory is differentiation, which pertains to an individual's capacity to distinguish their emotional processes from those of their family system. By recognizing and addressing dysfunctional patterns within the family, individuals can strive for increased emotional differentiation and healing. Differentiation, as defined by Bowen, is "a fundamental life process that shapes the way people navigate emotional togetherness and emotional separateness in their relationships with others" (p. 478). Bowen suggests that promoting healthier communication and relationships can alleviate strained family dynamics. In the novel, as family members gradually interact more, they gain insight into each other's thoughts and

emotions, leading to reduced misunderstandings and tension. Ultimately, they can collectively confront their pain and challenges, healing the wounds and disagreements that exist within the family.

Post-traumatic growth refers to positive psychological transformations that can occur in individuals who have faced significant trauma, adversity, or challenging life events. According to Bowen, PTSD often arises from unresolved emotional attachments and the failure to process the associated anxiety (p. 156). While trauma can cause distress and long-term negative effects, post-traumatic growth proposes that it can also contribute to positive changes in individuals' personal lives, relationships, and overall sense of self. The study of children of trauma survivors revealed that older individuals were more susceptible to intergenerational trauma transmission, possibly due to their greater responsibilities or being born closer to the end of the war (Lin et al., p. 1669). This was evident in Lee's family, where Nath suffered from deliberate neglect by his mother. Following the tragic event of Lydia's death, every family member was deeply shaken and began seeking redemption. According to family systems theory, within a closed and limited communication circle, parents and children often engaged in substitutive identification, with parents finding survival through their children, and children experiencing their parents' trauma, leading to blurred boundaries. Young children's perception of society was shaped by their parents, and the absence of positive emotional feedback from parents resulted in negation and indifference, which could lead to the development of timid and withdrawn behavior.

Following the loss of his daughter Lydia, James started revealing his sensitive and vulnerable side in two specific ways. Firstly, he occasionally pondered whether his desire to assimilate into American society had contributed to his daughter's suffering and oppression. This self-reflection evoked feelings of anger towards other family members, triggering both physical and emotional reactions like excitement and anger. These reactions might have served as a protective mechanism to cope with the trauma, as suggested by Herman (1992), who argues that traumatic events sever the supportive bonds between individuals and their community, leading to "feelings of helplessness and despair" (p. 37). This loss of control can result in frustration and anger. When Nath was caught searching for food in the refrigerator, James became angry and demanded to know if his son had the right to enter his own kitchen after a hard day's work, questioning, "what do you mean, you didn't expect me?" (Ng, p. 197). Given the neglect Nath had experienced, James' anger was justified. Secondly, the traumatic event heightened his sensitivity towards belonging. On his way home from meeting his lover Louisa, James encountered the vibrant balloons adorning the streets in anticipation of American Independence Day. This situation, akin to the second-generation female characters in *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), accentuated the challenge of comprehending cultural festivities and customs when one's family foundation is rooted in a different culture. This sense of displacement can be viewed as racial trauma, stemming from a history of racism and exploitation. Descendants of Chinese immigrants may feel compelled to alter themselves to fit into society, yet struggle to attain a genuine sense of cultural identity. Nath's apology did little to ease James' anger.

Moreover, Marilyn also faced internal struggles and actively sought self-redemption following a traumatic event. She frequently visited Lydia's room, searching for clues. Unlike James, she confronted

her own pain instead of avoiding it and held herself responsible. She recollected her mother's cookbook, which she interpreted as a sign that Lydia understood her desires, emphasizing that her daughter would never be confined to the kitchen (Ng, p. 247). This signified Marilyn's yearning for more—knowledge, social status, and the like. Marilyn removed the Einstein poster and periodic table from Lydia's room wall, symbols of her expectations. She began to realize that Lydia had never wanted to fulfill those expectations but had done so to bring her mother happiness. It's noteworthy that before becoming a full-time homemaker, Marilyn was an exceptional student, displaying learning abilities and concentration beyond the ordinary. Consequently, she diligently transferred the maternal love Lydia lacked to Hanna. When Hanna was discovered hiding outside the door, Marilyn readily embraced her. In family systems theory, the connections among family members play a crucial role in healing from trauma. Bowen argues that "the way family members interact within the family system significantly impacts the emotional and behavioral functioning of individual members" (p. 341). Marilyn recognized that her excessive expectations for Lydia could become overwhelming, leading her to no longer neglect Hanna's emotional needs deliberately.

Additionally, Nath, Lydia's brother and closest friend, was deeply traumatized by her death. They were always there for each other, but their relationship also inflicted trauma. Nath's exceptional academic performance became an invisible pressure on Lydia, who sought to please their mother through hard work. Lydia, who monopolized their parents' love, also sowed seeds of resentment and rebellion in Nath's heart. Psychologist Salvador Minuchin asserts that "when parents dismiss their child's experiences or emotional needs, the child may become angry, frustrated, or anxious, and may seek alternative means to fulfill those needs. This can lead to increased tension within the family system, further disrupting interaction and trust among family members" (p. 73). After Nath left for college, Lydia lost nearly all her friends as they were the only Chinese siblings at school. She desperately called Nath, but his laughter on the other end of the phone left Nath feeling adrift. Lydia was forever the center of their parents' attention, and no matter how hard Nath studied, he couldn't gain their approval. However, after Lydia's death, he began blaming himself for not calling her due to impatience and jealousy. In the phone call, he lamented, "I don't have time for this" (Ng, p. 264). According to Judith Herman's recovery theory, neglected children go through three stages: denial, self-blame, and recovery. During the denial and self-blame stage, Nath couldn't accept Lydia's death and believed his jealousy caused it. When he encountered the troubled Jack, he held him responsible for teaching Lydia bad things. However, even though the physical scars from their altercation healed quickly, the emotional scars did not. Nath began understanding Lydia and made the same choice their mother did. He started caring for his other sister and making up for his previous failure as an older brother.

Furthermore, the youngest member of the family, Hanna, has also undergone traumatic experiences. Unlike her parents and siblings, Hanna's trauma primarily originates from within the family. Due to their internal wounds, her parents and older siblings have neglected her, leading to her tendency to take items that others in the family don't use. When Lydia first went missing, Hanna placed blame on her sister for

abandoning the family, expressing, “how could you, when you knew what it was like” (Ng, p. 102). The family holds utmost significance for Hanna, and she struggles to comprehend her sister’s actions. On the night of Lydia’s disappearance, Hanna witnessed her sister heading towards the lake, and in an attempt to understand Lydia’s behavior, Hanna secretly practiced walking towards the lake for three weeks. In psychology, this phenomenon, where a child imitates a sibling, is often referred to as a “sister complex,” in which a younger child tries to compete with a more attention-seeking sibling, leading to a range of emotional challenges and dilemmas. “A child may become stuck in their developmental phase and exhibit behavior more similar to that of the sibling at their age. This behavior often serves as an attempt to escape reality, possibly due to disruptions in the child’s own childhood experiences or having undergone more traumas compared to the sibling” (Herman, p. 126). During many nights spent seeking answers to this issue, Hanna frequently recalls the last conversation she had with Lydia, “don’t ever smile if you don’t want to” (Ng, p. 261). This reflects Lydia’s own unresolved trauma, which she couldn’t overcome, but she imparted her courage and belief to Hanna. As mentioned earlier, because Hanna is still young, her parents and family members constitute her entire world. Therefore, as her parents and siblings start showering her with love, her series of behaviors resulting from neglect begin to fade away.

3.2 The Self-restoration and Parents-children Reconciliation

After experiencing internal conflict and attempting to find a solution, Lee’s family came to understand that their home was the ideal environment for personal redemption and mutual healing of their traumas. Recognizing that parental influence played a significant role in the intergenerational trauma within their family, the parents sought reconciliation with their children. Nath and Hanna also worked on developing self-awareness, using love as a binding force that united the family and helped alleviate the PTSD caused by their past traumas.

Initially, following the police investigation, James received a call informing him that the case would be closed as a suicide (Ng, p. 200). This news brought relief to James, an Asian-American man who empathized with Lydia’s experiences and misfortunes. He realized that Lydia’s misfortunes were rooted in her own identity, considering how her circumstances might have been different if she were a white girl and he a white man (Ng, p. 201). Filled with this realization, James hastily left his house and went to his lover Louisa’s place, where she had prepared a dish from his childhood, Char siu bau, a Chinese food item he hadn’t eaten in over four decades. As James tasted the food, it felt like a sweet, salty, and warm kiss (Ng, p. 205). Food often symbolizes the nourishment of the soul in various cultures. In James’s case, he needed something to “fill” the emotional void left by Lydia’s suicide, and Louisa’s Char siu bau served as a form of healing for his psychological trauma. Just as food satisfies physical hunger, it can also address emotional hunger, as Scholliers (2001) discusses in his paper on the symbolic nature of food, which represents people’s values, beliefs, identity, culture, and social relations (p. 2).

In the midst of his disappointment with his own life and his longing for Lydia, James engaged in a sexual encounter with Louisa. In a soft voice, he told her, “You’re the kind of girl I should have married” (Ng, p. 205). Through this statement, James expressed remorse for not marrying a Chinese-American girl like

Louisa, indicating his belief that he should not have married Marilyn to gain societal acceptance. However, James was also hesitant to marry Louisa because he didn't want to sever ties with his family and give up his social standing. This hesitation stemmed largely from his upbringing in a family environment where he lacked a strong emotional bond with his parents, preventing him from fully understanding the crucial role that family plays in a person's growth and development. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, humans possess an innate need for intimate relationships that influence their emotional development and personal characteristics. This need for attachment extends to romantic relationships, shaping people's behavior and emotions within them. Bowlby's theory suggests that individuals who had insecure attachment experiences during childhood may struggle to maintain stable and healthy adult relationships (p. 194). Louisa, who shared the same cultural background and identity as James, provided the attachment he lacked during his formative years. Thus, James's heartfelt sentiment expressed his internal struggle between seeking a sense of belonging and security and fulfilling his familial responsibilities.

Although Louisa and James shared a common cultural identity that offered some emotional fulfillment, James could never abandon his family. His utilitarian approach led him to prioritize returning to his family, allowing him to resume his previous life once his family overcame the psychological trauma caused by Lydia's death. According to Bowen's family systems theory, familial relationships are interconnected, and tension among family members may arise due to the instability of the family system. When one member starts to change their behavior, it can trigger reactions from others and lead to changes within the family system. Simultaneously, Marilyn began to recognize that her past attitude towards James may have contributed to his disillusionment with the family. Taking the initiative, she sought out Louisa and informed her that she was waiting for James at home. James understood Marilyn's gesture and prepared to return home to face everything. Marilyn grappled with feelings of inadequacy and unfulfilled dreams, prompting her to reflect on the psychological trauma she had unintentionally caused James with her thoughtless words. Through silence, Marilyn and James began to heal their relationship. She sat, hugging her knees like a little girl, attempting to bridge the gaps between what James had said, what he thought, and what he truly meant (Ng, pp. 212-213).

Secondly, towards the end of the novel, Marilyn and James acknowledge that the strained relationship caused by their racial differences has finally been acknowledged. They find solace in silence, realizing that it is all they need to communicate (Ng, p. 282). In addition, Marilyn and James apologize to each other through physical intimacy. In a moment of silence, Marilyn initiates contact by lightly touching James's hand, which he can barely feel. As he looks down, he sees Marilyn's fingers curled over his, offering a gentle squeeze. It had been so long since he had felt her touch. Even this small gesture of forgiveness meant a lot to him (Ng, p. 283). Marilyn chooses a gentler approach to reconcile their marriage by utilizing silence and intimacy as a bond. She expresses her true feelings and makes efforts to establish a more open and closer relationship, aiming to heal each other's wounds together.

James's and Marilyn's traumas, as previously discussed, stem from different sources. However, Lydia serves as the bond that maintains the facade of harmony within the family while concealing her own inner emotions. Marilyn searches through Lydia's bedroom in an attempt to understand what happened to her and discovers a series of diaries that she had given to Lydia since she was five years old, only to find them all blank. Determined to uncover the truth, Marilyn vows to figure out what happened to Lydia, who is responsible, and what went wrong (Ng, p. 76).

In the face of challenges or stress, a family system can create a tense and unstable emotional atmosphere, influencing the behavior and emotions of its members. Bowen believed that the core of the family system lies in its self-differentiation ability, which plays a crucial role in family healing. Self-differentiation refers to the ability to separate reason from emotion, and the greater the differentiation of self, the better individuals can cope with stress and maintain their self-integrity in the face of emotional pressures from others (Bowen, p. 99). This is essential for emotional healing within families.

In the novel, Lydia, as the central focus of the family, struggles to establish her own identity separate from others. She blames herself when her parents argue, and she insists that her brother Nath call back when he rebels and doesn't answer the phone. She tries to bridge the distance between family members and find a sense of security through her efforts. It is not until Lydia's crush, Jack, talks to her that she realizes her self-sacrifice stems from fear - fear that her mother will leave again and the family will fall apart. Consequently, she feels compelled to continue fulfilling her parents' expectations. Before Lydia walks to the center of the lake at the end of the novel, she realizes that she wants a fresh start.

Bowen also noted that in a family system, the emotional relationships between individuals are interconnected. He stated that the behavior of one family member inevitably affects the behavior of others, creating an interlocking system of mutual influence (Bowen, p. 19). In the end, Lydia achieves differentiation within herself and makes a reasoned choice, hoping to alleviate the indelible trauma for her parents and the family as a whole. While sitting in Lydia's bedroom, searching for the truth that Lydia never revealed, Marilyn finally understands why Lydia chose silence. It is during this time that Marilyn realizes the absence of a parent-child bond, prompting her to reconnect with her children. She reaches out to Nath, who has been grappling with grief and guilt, encouraging him to pursue his passion for astronomy. She also dedicates more time to Hannah, taking her on outings and making an effort to better understand her youngest child.

Thirdly, Nath confronts his feelings of anger and resentment towards his father James, allowing him to break free from emotional disconnection. Nath has long felt that James favored Lydia over him, and after Lydia's death, he becomes increasingly distant from his father. On the other hand, Hannah overcomes emotional disconnection by observing and learning from the experiences of her siblings and parents. Although initially a peripheral character in the novel, Hannah's keen observations of her family members' struggles and emotional disconnections enable her to develop empathy and understanding. Despite being the most reserved character, Hannah utilizes silence to her advantage and holds significant agency. She represents the compromise resulting from her parents' failed attempts to assimilate into society. Having

not received excessive love or intervention from her parents, she becomes a primal force within the family, capable of healing intergenerational trauma. By the end of the novel, she manages to establish deeper connections with her family members, especially her mother Marilyn. The disclosure and confrontation of trauma can be challenging and emotionally demanding, and the approaches adopted by Nath, Lydia, and Hannah may vary based on their individual experiences and coping mechanisms.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this thesis highlights the importance of the family structure in healing intergenerational trauma within the family. It explores trauma formation, its manifestations, and the coping strategies employed by the Lee family. Drawing on theories by Herman and Bowen, the thesis examines the root causes of trauma in James and Marilyn and emphasizes the significance of trauma recovery within the family system.

The study underscores the need for an open and positive mindset, mutual understanding, and the rebuilding of stable family relationships for effective trauma healing. This is particularly relevant in cross-ethnic families, where conflicts arising from different educational philosophies and parenting styles can lead to severe psychological trauma. The family unit plays a crucial role in reducing and recovering from intergenerational trauma, offering opportunities for personal redemption and cooperative healing within the familial structure.

Additionally, the thesis provides valuable insights into resolving conflicts and traumas in inter-ethnic families and addresses the psychological trauma resulting from unfair treatment of ethnic minorities and women at the societal level.

As cross-cultural interactions continue to shape our global society, the study of conflicts and traumas arising from cultural differences becomes increasingly important. The rise in inter-ethnic marriages and immigration calls for a comprehensive understanding of intergenerational trauma and its impact on parents and children. Adopting an inclusive and forward-thinking perspective is essential in embracing and adapting to these transformative shifts.

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