Original Paper

Out of the Marginality: The Pursuit of Female Community in

Little Fires Everywhere

Wen Su[1]

[1] School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

Abstract

Celeste Ng, also called Wu Qishi, is a new generation of American female writer. While inheriting the traditional writing on culture and identity exploration, she expands her vision to other minority groups in society. Little Fires Everywhere is her most representative work since the publication of Everything I Never Told You. The novel unfolds through two story lines, presenting three marginal women, and they are from different background. This paper integrates the discourse on the marginal man and the theory of community to analyze the predicament of the three marginal women and its underlying causes. It reveals that the author provides a solution for women transcend their marginalized status by establishing a female community. The female community aims at subverting gender, class and social oppression, taking female friendship as spiritual bonds, and Shaker Heights as the space for coexistence, which provides a useful field for marginal women to break through their predicament and find a sense of belonging.

Keywords

marginal women, female community, female bonding, Little Fires Everywhere

1. Introduction

Born in 1980, Celeste Ng is a new generation of American female author. Her first novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014), won multiple awards upon its initial publication. In 2017, Celeste Ng released her new novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, which was immediately awarded the status of Book of the Year on 27 occasions. Through her persistent writing, Celeste Ng expresses her concern and profound thinking about social problems and human condition. *Little Fires Everywhere* takes the acquaintance between Mia, her daughter Pearl with the family of Mr. Richardson as the main story line, and the immigrant woman Bebe's custody battle with the McCulloughs as a subplot. It tells the stories of four families in Shaker Heights, presenting a portrait of a group of female images. Mia, an artist who

pursues freedom and independence, has been living "on the road" with her daughter Pearl. And when they arrive in Shaker Heights, they decide to end their wanderings and stay in this place. Their landlords, the Richardsons, are exemplary residents in Shaker Heights, living a secure and dignified life in a large, luxurious house. However, Mia's freedom and unconventional lifestyle gradually affects the Richardson children, especially the two daughters, who admire Mia for her ability to be true to herself and pursue purity and freedom, unlike the so-called "role models" in the neighbourhood. However, Mrs Richardson, in order to uphold the rules of Shaker Highland and personal feelings, uses her position to dig up Mia's privacy and drive her and her daughters away in the end. Later, Izzy, the Richardsons' youngest daughter, sets fire to the house and leaves to follow Mia and her daughter. At the same time, an unmarried immigrant woman, Bebe, gives birth to a female infant, Mirabelle. Due to the reality of her inability to raise her, she has no alternative but to abandon her daughter by placing her in front of a fire station. The girl is adopted by an American couple, the McCulloughs, and subsequently Bebe regrets her decision and engages in a custody battle with the couple for her daughter in a foreign land.

2. Literary Review

The novel has been analyzed from a number of perspectives, including those of identity, mother-daughter relationships, and class. For example, Hector, an American critic, highlights in the New York Times that Celeste Ng explores a complex life story in *Little Fires Everywhere*, discussing in depth the issue of identity and choice. Similarly, Carlos has suggested that Celeste Ng's novel is akin to a complex spider's web linking gender, motherhood and class privilege. The initial phase of domestic research on this novel commenced in 2018. Among them, Sheng Yuanyuan investigates the protagonist's identity construction from the perspective of mirror theory (Sheng, 2021); Furthermore, some researchers have examined the novel from the trauma and postcolonial perspectives, such as Ai Mingjing, who explores the source of the protagonist's trauma and its restoration from the trauma perspective (Ai, 2023); Du Xingyu analyzes the decolonization writing in the novel from the perspective of discipline and resistance (Du, 2023). With the discourse about the Marginal man and theories about community, this paper tries to analyze the marginal dilemma of women in the novel, and explores the author's attempt to help female group out the predicament by constructing a female community.

3. The Marginal Plight and Causes

The novel portrays a group of female characters belonging to four distinct families. It illustrates how marginality is a pervasive phenomenon among many of the female characters, who are marginalized within their respective societies and families, and isolated from the mainstream social center. The concept of the "marginal man" can be traced back to the German sociologist Georg Simmel's interpretation of the concept of the 'stranger'. Simmel posits that people from different cultural groups are strangers to each other, and that the stranger is a cultural outsider who is close to us in physical

2

space but culturally, socially and emotionally distant (Simmel, p. 109). In his seminal work, Kurt Lewin, a German psychologist, identified the psychological characteristics of the marginal person from a psychological perspective. He proposes that the marginal person is one who participates incompletely in both social groups, occupying a position that is in-between the two groups (Lewin, p. 307). In the early twentieth century, American sociologist R.E. Park shifts his attention to the marginalized, examining their experiences through the perspective of migration. In his book, he posits that marginalized individuals often occupy a liminal space, straddling two cultural traditions that are simultaneously distinct and intertwined (Park, p. 881). Subsequently, Stonequist broadens and develops the concept of "marginalized men". Stonequist posits that interracial migration is merely one way through which an individual may experience marginalization. He asserts that a multitude of factors, including cultural beliefs, gender, and psychological factors, contribute to marginalization to varying degrees (Stonequist, p. 5). With the continuous development of the theory of "marginalized men", research on marginalized groups has become more diversified, and the concept of marginalized people has gradually shown a tendency to be generalized. Those who exhibit psychological, cultural, and gender differences from the mainstream of society can be collectively designated as "marginal people" or individuals with marginal personality traits.

3.1 Mia: A Marginalized Mother in Society

The protagonist, Mia, leads a nomadic existence with her daughter, lacking both a fixed abode and a stable source of income. As a result, she becomes marginalized within both the social and familial structures that surround her. Marginality runs through Mia's growth and life. Mia developed an affinity for photography at the age of eleven, and since then has pursued a dedicated course of study in the field. However, her parents did not acknowledge or encourage her interest, perceiving it as an unprofessional pursuit. Consequently, she was compelled to pursue her passion independently. Mia funded her studies at the New York Academy of Art independently. Following the birth of her daughter Pearl, she opted not to pursue a conventional path as a single mother, instead embarking on a nomadic journey with her daughter. Upon completion of a set of works, Mia would embark once more with her daughter in search of the subsequent location offering shelter. Such a lifestyle, characterized by brief periods of residence in different locations, is the norm for Mia and her daughter. But such lifestyle is intolerable to both Mia's family and the society dedicated to constructing rules. "Marginality is an objective existence, moreover, a subjective existence, which depends on the subjective response of different marginalized people to marginality in different contexts" (Zhao, p. 117). Mia's marginality is characterized by a greater degree of autonomous choice. When mainstream society is unable to accept an individual's lifestyle and values, the individual may seek to defend their way of life by moving away from the center and retreating to the margins. Mia has chosen to defend her life by escaping from the mainstream.

3.2 Izzy: A Marginalized Daughter in the Family

If Mia's marginality is tinged with subjective choice, then Izzy's marginality is the result of the distorted family environment and mother-daughter relationship. As the youngest daughter of the Richardson family, Izzy has a stable and decent living environment like her other siblings, yet she does not have the self-confidence that is found in her older sister Lexie, nor does she have the attractiveness that is shown by her older brother Trip. She is perceived as the most anomalous and divergent member of the family. The book commences with a scene depicting a smoke-filled fire at the Richards residence. Izzy becomes the natural target of suspicion, and is subsequently identified as the perpetrator of the crime, despite the lack of definitive evidence. To outsiders, she is already a bit crazy; when the fire breaks out, Mrs Richards panics and goes to look for each of the children, except for Izzy, "It struck her that she had not looked for Izzy, as if she had known already that Izzy was to blame" (Elaine Ng, p. 2). "Crazy" and "lunatic" are what the other family members' description about Izzy, and Izzy's unconventional behavior is the result of the family's neglection of her personality and individuality.

Izzy grows up with a rebellious spirit that is not tolerated by the rule-bound Richardsons, and Izzy's unusual behaviour is suppressed and her individuality is not allowed to flourish. The distortion of the mother-daughter relationship is also a major reason why Izzy teeters on the fringes of the family, and Mrs Richardson is excessively strict with Izzy to the point of anxiety. "The rush of anxiety, the fear that permeated her thoughts of Izzy. The microscopic focus on each thing Izzy did, turning it this way and that, scrutinizing it for signs of weakness or disaster" (p. 84). Izzy, characterized by an inherent propensity for nonconformity, had a strong aversion to being constrained. This inclination led her to consistently interpret her mother's actions as deliberately challenging, which she attributed to a perceived animosity on her mother's part. "The sense all the children had-including Izzy-was that she was a particular disappointment to their mother, that for reasons unclear to them, their mother resented her" (p. 85). Consequently, in the family life, Izzy's expression and emotional response are overlooked. She had developed a tendency that entails maintaining a physical and emotional distance from family members and disengaging from the central activities of family life, which serves as a means for her to exercise autonomy and asserts her individuality.

3.3 Bebe: A Marginalized Immigrant in America

Bebe, a female immigrant residing in America, experienced abandonment by her boyfriend following the birth of their child. Bebe suffered both physical and mental torment. As a solitary immigrant in a foreign land, Bebe confronts linguistic barriers that restrict her employment opportunities to a local restaurant. Despite her efforts, the modest income she derives from this work is insufficient to cover her living expense. Meanwhile, faced with the fact that her boyfriend abandoned her, she suffered from post-natal depression after giving birth to her daughter, which led her to the idea of giving her daughter away. She drops her daughter off in front of the fire station and is later taken in by the McCulloughs. However, the ties of blood prevents her from giving up his daughter, so Bebe is left alone in a foreign country to fight with a white couple for the custody of her daughter. As a single woman, Bebe's

4

personal situation mirrors the life experience of immigrants in America in the 19th century, and marginalization is the real situation of many people in a foreign land. As a woman who lacks life skills, Bebe can only find hope in life through her own efforts.

4. Solution: The Construction of Female Community

Confronted with the reality of women's marginalization, the author explores ways for women to overcome their challenges and derive strength from the establishment of female community. The study of community is currently a hot and prominent topic of academic research, yet there remains considerable debate and no consensus has been reached. The earliest known discussion of the concept can be traced back to the ancient Greek period, when Aristotle regarded the city-state as a form of community, in which the members of the city-state work together for a common goal. In the eighteenth century, Hegel advanced the concept of family, citizen, and state communities. Marx posited that the true form of human community is the association of free men, which he believed to be the optimal means of meeting human needs. Ferdinand Tönnies posits that a community is a group of people who live together, share common values and an emotional orientation, and can be further categorized into three types: communities of blood, communities of place and communities of spirit (Tönnies, p. 268). Raymond Williams posits that the term "community" denotes a shared care between groups of people, formed at the relational and emotional levels (Williams, p. 215). He Weihua, a domestic scholar, posits that a community is a group of individuals residing in the same geographical area who share common habits, interests, and culture. This shared identity fosters a sense of belonging and enables harmonious coexistence and mutual assistance. (He, p. 7). Based on the above traceability of the concept of "community", there is a commonality among different discourse: that is, the emphasis on mutual assistance and care between individuals and collectives and members of the society. Additionally, members of society are unified by shared goals and the construction of community is realized through the coexisting living space, which is shaped by the ties of blood, emotions or beliefs.

The concept of community is further emphasized within the context of female communities, whereby the common experiences and emotional encounters among women encourage them to provide mutual support and comfort. This results in the formation of a female community, characterized by a unique sense of sisterhood among women. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, three women from marginalized situation share their experiences and emotions, provide each other with assistance and support, and draw strength from the female community in order to find a way out of their own predicament.

4.1 Common Goals: Subverting Gender, Glass and Social Oppression

Tönnies argues that a community is constituted by the existence of a consensus among its members - a perfect unity of human will. This consensus may be separate from each member's individual will, yet it maintains a state of unity through its own will, combining in an organic way. The subversion of gender, class and social oppression is a consensus among women, forming a common goal and a unifying factor within the female community. The patriarchal society constrains women' capabilities and

5

accentuated their deficiencies. Mia plays a significant role in assisting Izzy and Bebe in their awakening as the female community is established. In contrast to Mrs. Richardson, who leads a conventional lifestyle, Mia exemplifies the potential for contemporary women's life, as reflected in her own experiences. Mrs Richardson relinquishes her career in deference to her familial responsibilities, a factor that renders her inherently resistant to Mia's influence. Mia demonstrates in her own actions a way of life that is free from other people's dependence, independent and free.

Mrs Richardson is also a woman, but she epitomizes the patriarchal system in a capitalist society. She displays a lack of affection towards her youngest daughter, Izzy, due to her belief that girls should pursue a life of peace and quiet, characterized by practicality and discipline, in accordance with the norms of the middle class. This belief is the underlying cause of her animosity towards Mia and Bebe. Nevertheless, this successful middle-class life is made feasible by many capable, ambitious women who relinquished their dreams and aspirations to men, giving up their title rights and egos to support their husbands and educate their children. "Wherever human beings are united in an organic way by their will and consensus, there exists a community" (Tönnies, p. 132), and the sense of superiority demonstrated by Mrs Richardson is rendered void in the case of Mia and Bebe. This is because a decent and lavish middle-class life is not the sole aspiration of all, and even her own young daughter acts in opposition to the gender and class consciousness conveyed by her family.

Following the loss of her daughter, Bebe is encouraged by Mia and Izzy to demonstrate fortitude and utilize the tenets of justice to defend her rights. Bebe is no longer isolated in her endeavour to regain custody of her daughter; instead, she is supported by the reliable friendship and assistance of Mia and Izzy. The three women from different backgrounds show that women can help each other with love and friendship regardless of class and background. The members of female community in *Little Fires Everywhere* are united in their opposition to patriarchal, class and social authority, and their challenge to the Richardsons and the McCulloughs.

The female characters establish a harmonious relationship founded on principles of equality and mutual support, united in their pursuit of a common objective. Furthermore, the word "fire" is employed as a recurring image in the novel, beginning with the ongoing fire at Richard's house, echoed in the epilogue, and separated by a title. Confronting the confused Izzy, Mia tells her, "About the prairie fires? About how sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground and start over? (p. 242), the fire in Mia's heart provides her with the motivation to challenge the dominant social and cultural norms and to pursue a life of her own. while the fire in Izzy's heart serves as a source of strength, enabling her to break free from the oppressive influence of her family. Furthermore, the fire in Bebe's heart represents her resilience and determination to fight against discrimination and prejudice in a foreign country. The metaphor of fire is used to illustrate the potential for transformation and emancipation. It is suggested that the burning down of oppression, resistance against patriarchy, class can be achieved through the use of this metaphorical weapon. The three women are presented as the embodiment of this transformative force.

6

4.2 Emotional Ties: Female Bonding

Hooks, an American scholar, asserts that radical postmodernism highlights shared emotions that transcend class, gender, and race. These emotions, in turn, become a fertile ground for the construction of empathy, which can serve as a basis for solidarity and alliance (Hooks, p. 89). The emotional cohesion of the female community in *Little Fires Everywhere* is evident in the mutual support and empowerment between Mia and Izzy, as well as between Bebe and Izzy. Izzy is a rebellious figure who was born and raised in the conservative and rule-bound community of Shaker Heights. Upon meeting Mia for the first time, Izzy experiences a sense of attraction towards her, perceiving her as an outsider within the Richardson family. Izzy, who has been suspended from school for contradicting her teacher, encounters Mia, who is employed at her house. Upon seeing Izzy, who appears despondent, Mia does not inquire about the cause, but instead prepares a sandwich for her. She perceives Mia's benevolence and unwavering amicability, not as pity, but as a distinct contrast to the opinions held by others. Izzy gradually reveals to Mia the rationale behind her contradictory response to her teacher. Mia understands and affirms Izzy, a reply she has not previously conceived, and if Mrs Richardson had learned of the course of events, instead of understanding her, she would have blamed her recklessness and feared her outburst.

The development of emotional resonance in women is a consequence of the convergence of shared physiological processes and experiences, which give rise to a similar range of realizations. In the presence of Mia, Izzy experiences a sense of warmth and affirmation, which, as she perceives it, constitutes implicit permission to engage in activities that had previously been denied to her, and "In those words she heard a permission to do what she's always been told not to: to take matters into her own hands, to make trouble" (p. 62). Subsequently, Izzy experiences a sense of unity with Mia, perceiving them as unique and rebellious individuals with an underlying inclination towards destruction.

At the same time, Mia sees in Izzy younger herself and the desire to rebel, "She reminded Mia, oddly, of herself at around that age, traipsing through the neighborhood, climbing over fences and walls in search of the right photograph, defiantly spending her mother's money on film" (p. 68). After this, Izzy's demeanor shifts from that of a reclusive adolescent to one of a young girl brimming with enthusiasm for life, whose passion is ignited by her admiration for Mia, "When it was just the two of them, it was easy for Izzy to pretend that Mia was her mother, that the bedroom down the hallway was hers, and that when night fell she would go into it and sleep and wake in the morning" (p. 70). The sharing of female emotional experiences and female experiences serves to unite female friendships. The creation of a shared emotional structure facilitates emotional harmony among the members of the community, engendering a sense of warmth and strengthening the community. Mia, who is also a single mother, is better able to appreciate the experiences and emotions of other mothers when she befriends Bebe. Mia and Bebe meet due to their concurrent employment at the same restaurant. Mia becomes Bebe's most reliable listener, and their shared experiences as women and mothers foster a sense of

7

empathy and understanding between them. Upon discovering the whereabouts of Bebe's daughter, Mia decides to tell Bebe. Despite the vast differences in language and social customs between them, the white women and the immigrant women unknowingly gain emotional identification with each other in the face of the crisis. This emotion facilitates the rise of sisterhood among them. "The idea that someone might take a mother's child away: it horrified her. It was as if someone had slid a blade into her and with one quick twist hollowed her out, leaving nothing inside but a cold rush of air" (p. 93). Mia provided unwavering support to Bebe throughout the custody proceedings, demonstrating unconditional solidarity and commitment.

The shared marginalization causes Izzy to stand up for Bebe when she is in trouble. When the Richardsons support the McCullough couple in their battle for custody of the baby girl, Izzy openly defies them based on the sense of shared female identity, "They're practically kidnapping her. And everyone's just letting them. Daddy's even helping" (p. 104), Izzy witnesses Bebe's pain after the loss of her daughter, and sympathized with her suffering. Different women gain strength from each other and stimulate their sense of power and collective empowerment, thus helping to build a closer unity, which has become an important basis for female groups to resist patriarchy and even racism.

4.3 Co-existing Space: Shaker Heights

The Shaker Heights in the book is the product of the integration of Eastern and Western cultures, and it is known as the "Looking down upon the grimy city of Cleveland from a mountaintop at the end of a rainbow's arch" (p. 17). The maintenance of a community depends on the identity and belonging in the hearts of its members (He, p. 8). Shaker Heights is a place full of rules and order. The local government has a strict and unified plan for urban planning, from the color of the house appearance to the classification and placement of garbage, there are unified requirements. At the same time, local residents also work together to maintain the order of Shaker Heights.

At the same time, it shows an open attitude, demonstrating tolerance and acceptance towards the advent of new members, and affording them the same degree of care and protection. Despite their status as mere tenants in Shaker Heights, Mia and her daughter are able to enjoy the full benefits associated with that of local residents. The acceptance of Mia and her daughter in the Shaker Heights represents a preference for inclusiveness, and provides a suitable living space for the ongoing operation of the female community. (Jia, p. 98). Furthermore, the concept of a strict but inclusive community exists in Shaker Heights. The local school accommodates students of different background, and as Lexie says, "Look at me and Brian. We've been together since junior year and no one gives a crap that I'm white and he's black" (p. 33). Mia and her daughter quickly adapt to the local way of life and come to accept themselves as an integral part of the Shaker Heights community.

Similarly, Shaker Heights provides an inclusive living space for immigrants, and Bebe works in a local restaurant in Shaker Heights and gets to know Mia, and a rental house in Shaker Heights has become a field for three women to share their feelings with each other, "Instead of sequestering herself in her bedroom with her violin, she would walk the mile and a half to the house on Winslow right after school,

8

where Mia would be hard at work" (p. 69). Izzy takes the rental house as her home, where she feels the warmth brought by Mia. Similarly, when Bebe encounters challenges and transitions in life, she consistently contemplates seeking assistance and support at Mia's residence. Shaker Heights serves as a model of inclusive community, provides a space for three women to help each other.

5. Conclusion

The author juxtaposes three female images in the same space, revealing the survival predicament inherent to the female individuals. The author attempts to offer a solution to the marginal dilemma faced by women by establishing a female community that seeks to challenge the oppression experienced by women on the basis of their gender, class and race. This community is based on the idea of female friendship as an emotional bond and the place of Shaker Heights as a space for coexistence. Through the female community, women living in marginality can gain a sense of belonging and survival, thus providing impetus for getting rid of their own difficulties and striving to walk out of the predicament. At the same time, the author abandons the focus of binary opposition in traditional immigrant writing, advocates the community concept of inclusiveness and mutual assistance, presenting a new paradigm and more possibilities of immigrant writing in the new era.

Reference

Ai, M. J. (2023). *An Analysis of Character Trauma in Little Fires Everywhere from the Perspective of Trauma Theory*. Changchun University of Science and Technology.

Celeste, Ng. (2019). *Little Fires Everywhere*. Penguin Books.

Du, X. Y. (2021). D*iscipline and Resistance: The Decolonial Writing in Little Fries Everywhere*. Northwest University.

Everett, V. S. (1961). *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict*. New York: Russell & Russell Inc.

Ferdinand, T. (2020). *Community and Civil Society*. Mockingbird Press.

Georg, S. (2009). *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*. Leiden Boston. Brill.

He, W. H. (2003). Community and Modernity. *Foreign Language and Literature Reaearch*, *9*(1), 6-13.

Hooks, B. (2015). *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315743110

Lewin, K. (1936). *Principles of Topological Psychology*. New York and London: McGRAW-HILL Book COMPANY, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1037/10019-000

Williams, R. (1985). *A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. New York: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Park, R. E. (1928). Migration and the Marginal Man. *American Journal of Sociology*, 881-893. https://doi.org/10.1086/214592

Sheng, Y. Y. (2023). A*n Analysis of the Protagonist' Identity Construction in Little Fires Everywhere from the Perspective of Mirror Theory*. Liaoning University.

Zhao, X. (2021). Rethinking the Theory of "Marginal Man": Context, Logic and Trends. *Social Science International*, *2021*(4), 116-127.