

An Exploration of Self-Determination in Female Identity Construction in Celeste Ng's Novels

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Abstract—This paper examines Celeste Ng's three novels, which are *Everything I Never Told You*, *Little Fires Everywhere*, and *Our Missing Hearts*, to explore the mechanisms and literary representations of "self-determination" in identity construction. Drawing upon self-determination theory and identity theory, this paper examines the life journeys of three female protagonists Marilyn, Mia, and Margaret to reveal the complex paths individuals traverse in pursuing autonomous identities amid the intertwined constraints of culture, family, and society. The study finds that the notion of self-determination in Ng's works is not an ephemeral act of rebellion, but rather a continuous process of resistance, reflection, and reconstruction. The arduous process of identity construction for these three women reveals the dynamic interplay between individual will and external structures. Ultimately, Ng redefines contemporary female subjectivity within a multicultural context, portraying self-determination as a path toward ethical awakening and identity reconstruction. This paper aims to provide an in-depth analysis of the role of self-determination in female identity construction and to explore its implications for contemporary female subjectivity within a multicultural context.

Keywords—celeste Ng, self-determination, subjectivity, identity construction, female

I. INTRODUCTION

In the background of globalization and multiculturalism, the issue of individual identity has increasingly become a significant topic in literary studies. Identity construction is no longer merely a process of solidifying social labels, but rather a complex practice through which individuals actively choose and continuously negotiate their identities via self-identification under the multiple constraints of family, culture, and society. In women's literary creation, self-determination and subjectivity have gradually become the core forces in identity construction. Celeste Ng's novel paints this journey with exquisite detail, revealing the multifaceted nature of female growth and identity exploration through the tensions of family, culture, and society. This study examines three novels by Ng, focusing on the self-determination practices of female protagonists Marilyn, Mia, and Margaret during their identity construction processes. Marilyn struggles between family expectations and her own will, Mia pursues self-discovery through wandering and exploration, and Margaret reconstructs her identity through memory and writing.

Although considerable research on Ng has been conducted both domestically and internationally, focusing primarily on family ethics, ethnic identity, or female development, the intrinsic relationship between self-determination and identity construction remains relatively insufficient. To this end, this study conducts a close reading and comparison of the three novels, drawing upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and identity construction theory, to examine the experiences of

the three female protagonists in depth and, finally, to perform a cross-sectional comparison that reveals both the commonalities and differences in their identity exploration.

This paper is structured as follows: it begins with an analysis of Marilyn's struggle in identity construction, followed by a discussion of Mia's nomadic search for self, then an examination of Margaret's identity reconstruction, and concludes with a comparison and summary of the three protagonists. Through an examination of female identity construction in Ng's novels, this paper seeks to demonstrate how self-identification functions as a key force driving the awakening of subjectivity, and to highlight its ethical and literary implications in the context of contemporary multicultural context.

II. MARILYN'S STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY

Marilyn is a highly complex character in *Everything I Never Told You*, who spends her life in pursuit of self-identity, yet constantly struggles between societal expectations, familial responsibilities, and personal dreams. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), "there are at least three universal psychological needs—specifically, needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness—that are essential for optimal development and functioning" [1]. Through SDT, we can gain a deeper understanding of Marilyn's inner conflict and her behavioral choices.

A. Pursuing Self in Dilemma

First, at the level of autonomy, Marilyn is torn between her suppressed personal dreams and her passive acceptance of her role. "Autonomy refers to being the perceived origin or source of one's own behavior" [2], and represents the individual's ability to make decisions on his or her own, yet Marilyn's life has been a tug of war between "choice" and "external expectations." When she was young she aspired to become a doctor, and once the counselor asked her, " 'why do you want to take physics?' and she explained shyly that she was hoping to become a doctor" [3], she doesn't want to follow the traditional female role expectations of a mother and simply be a good wife and mother. This was her true inner motivation, but it ultimately failed to realize. She had to interrupt her medical dream to marry James and become a housewife because she became pregnant. This decision was not of her own choosing, but was influenced by external circumstances and is a "controlled motive." Later, as she attempted to return to academia and pursue her dreams, "she would apply to medical school. Only eight years later than planned...she drove an hour to the community college outside Toledo and enrolled in organic chemistry, advanced statistics, anatomy: everything she'd planned for her last semesters" [3].

But she tested pregnant again and eventually returned to her family; “Her grand plan had lasted nine weeks...This is it, Marilyn told herself. Let it go. This is what you have. Accept it” [3]. This suggests that her autonomy has never been truly realized and that she has always struggled with the conflict of her self-identity. Marilyn tries to strive for autonomy but ultimately remains affected by social roles, family responsibilities, and practical constraints that result in the fact that she has never been able to truly realize her personal autonomy in her choices; “Marilyn, packing those dreams away in lavender for their daughter, disappointment layered beneath her smile. Triply sequestered by house and dead-end street and tiny college town, her hands soft and uncalloused but idle. The intricate gears of her mind ticking silently at no one, thoughts pinging the closed windows like a trapped bee” [3].

B. Unfulfilled Aspiration

At the level of sense of competence, Marilyn possesses only her unrealized sense of personal worth. Competence represents an individual’s trust in his or her own abilities and whether or not he or she will be able to achieve goals through hard work. Academically, she was eager to prove herself. She was passionate about medicine and studied hard in an attempt to break through society’s stereotypes of women. “She’d had the highest grade in her class, had set the curve on every test; she had loved physics...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” [3]. But with the advent of marriage and children, expectations from the outside world, all of these “pressure affect feelings of autonomy and competence and thus undermine intrinsic motivation” [4], so she fails to accomplish her goals ultimately, which leads to a frustration with her sense of competence. As she fails to realize her academic dreams, she places all her expectations on her daughter Lydia; “She would help Lydia do everything she was capable of. She would spend the rest of her years guiding Lydia, sheltering her...To encourage her, for the rest of her life, to do more than her mother had” [3]. She wants Lydia to make up for her life’s regrets, which is her way of rebuilding her sense of competence by “controlling” others. But this approach adds to Lydia’s psychological stress and ultimately leads to Lydia losing herself.

C. Misplaced Relatedness

At the level of relatedness, Marilyn is faced with the breakdown and repair of family relationships. Relatedness refers to feeling connected to others [2], yet Marilyn’s life is extremely contradictory in this regard. First, there’s her confrontation with her mother, who is the home ec teacher, “She began tangling the thread on her sewing machine. She snipped patterns without unfolding them, making paper-cut lace of the layers beneath...” [3]. When she was young, she disagreed with her mother’s traditional views and refused to become a full-time housewife, but eventually she had to follow this path. Her relatedness belongs to a state of fragmentation, wanting to get rid of her mother’s influence but unable to completely detach herself from society’s expectations to women’s roles. Then, there is the marriage to James, where Marilyn faces the pitfalls of conflicting identities. The identity conflict between her husband James,

who is Asian and belongs to a marginalized group in American society, and herself, a woman who does not want to be bound by tradition, makes the relationship between the two always cracked. The tensions that existed between the different ethnic groups were emphasized by the altercation that followed Lydia’s death, “when Marilyn says this—If she were a white girl—it proves what James has feared all along. That inside, all along, she’d labeled everything. White and not white. That this thing makes all the difference in the world” [3]. Finally, there is the relationship with Lydia, where Marilyn finds a misplaced relatedness. Marilyn thinks she’s giving Lydia the best possible future and expects her to fulfill her unfulfilled dreams, but Lydia doesn’t actually want to be the person her mother expects her to be, “Everything that she had wanted for Lydia, which Lydia had never wanted but had embraced anyway...It had not been science that Lydia had loved” [3]. This misplaced relatedness eventually leads to Lydia’s tragedy and Marilyn’s descent into deep self-blame, “A dull chill creeps over her. Perhaps—and this thought chokes her—that had dragged Lydia underwater at last” [3]. Marilyn is always searching for a sense of belonging, but her relationships with her mother, her husband, and her daughter are all somehow fractured, ultimately keeping her sense of belonging precarious; “You loved so hard and hoped so much and you ended up with nothing. Children who no longer needed you. A husband who no longer wanted you. Nothing left but you, alone, and empty space” [3].

III. MIA’S NOMADIC JOURNEY OF SELF

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Mia Warren is a character who strongly embodies the three psychological needs of SDT. Through Mia’s life path and inner world, it is clear to see how these three needs have shaped her personality and choices.

A. Wandering for Freedom and Self-hood

Above all, Mia’s outlook on life deeply reflects a quest for autonomy. Unlike the Richardsons, who live their lives tightly around societal norms and standards of success. Mia insists on defining life in her own way, rejecting the traditional sense of a stable life, moving from city to city and living wherever her heart desires; “Once Mia mailed her photographs, Pearl always knew, they would pack up the car again and the entire process would repeat. One town, one project, and then it was time to move on” [5]. Mia’s wandering is not an escape, but a positive self-choice, reflecting the ultimate defense of individual freedom. Even in the face of great family pressure, she still insists on her love and pursues her artistic creation and dreams. For her parents, her devotion means “throwing their money away on art school. If she wanted art school so badly, she would have to pay her own way” [5]. But Mia didn’t let that deter her, “she would pay for with a part-time job” [5], plus a tuition scholarship offered by the school. This insistence on her own devotion shows that “autonomy support leads to self-determined forms of motivation” [6], while being central to her identity.

B. Crafting the Meaning of Life through Art

Mia’s competence is chiefly reflected in her engagement with artistic creation. She realizes her self-worth in the field of art by documenting the world through photography and

telling the overlooked scenes and stories of life through her lens. Despite financial constraints, she has never given up her love and dedication to the arts, and this persistence continues to reinforce her trust and respect for her own abilities. In the process of pursuing art, Mia received high praise from a great photographer-Wilkinson, who not only recognized her unique perspective in photography, “You’ve got a good eye. Good eye and good instincts. That is a fine shot” [5], but also encouraged her to stick to her personal style. This recognition from professionals has greatly enhanced Mia’s confidence in her artistic talents. As a famous photographer, Pauline Hawthorne was not only a mentor and friend to Mia, but also gave her a deep spiritual recognition; “she had kissed Mia on the cheek. ‘I’m expecting great things from you’” [5]. In addition, through the help of gallery agent Anita, Mia’s photographs were sold and entered the art market. “Her work became regarded well enough in the art world that Anita could sell more pieces, for more money” [5]. Such tangible commercial success not only offers Mia financial stability but also affirms the acknowledgment of her artistic value within both the public sphere and the collectors’ community. Mia’s sense of competence in SDT stems not only from recognition by professional authorities and market success, but also from the process of expressing herself authentically. The emotional response and social recognition she continues to receive has allowed her to build a deeper sense of competence in her artistic identity, so “feelings of competence can be enhanced and therefore motivation can be increased” [7].

C. Weaving Bonds of Blood and Beyond

In the end, even though Mia has chosen a lifestyle of alienation from mainstream society, her need for relatedness is just as real and deep. She has developed a deep emotional connection with her daughter Pearl, “She would be famous someday, Pearl was certain; someday her adored mother would be one of those artists, like de Kooning or Warhol or O’Keeffe, whose name everyone knew. One day everyone would see her mother’s brilliance” [5]; this mother-daughter relationship is based on understanding, support and trust and fulfills her deep need to belong. Mia is not alone in her pursuit of art; Mia’s brother Warren has always been her strongest supporter. When Mia decided to choose the path of art, “Warren reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded stack of bills. ‘I think you should take this. It won’t pay for all the rest, but it’ll be most of it’” [5]. This unconditional kinship support met Mia’s most basic need for relevance at a critical point in her growth, and after her brother’s accidental death, Mia replaced her brother’s first name, Warren, with her original last name, Wright, and has been living under the name Mia Warren ever since. Pauline continues to guide Mia’s artistic growth as her mentor; “Mia would bring her newest photographs to show Pauline nearly every week, and they would talk them over, Pauline pressing her to articulate what she’d done and why. Pauline challenged her to be intentional, to plan her forward the photo might seem” [5]. It was at Pauline’s that Mia first experienced being recognized as an “artist.” This connection, based on co-creation, emotional resonance and deep understanding, not only nourished Mia’s artistic expression, but also provided a strong support for her identity. Additionally, Anita’s role as an art broker, while based on a more professional level of

relationship with Mia, still provides an important degree of support in terms of social relevance. Anita recognizes the value of Mia’s work and helps her bring her art to market, “after heated auction, got Mia two years’ worth of time, even after the fifty-percent commission” [5]. This is not only a commercial success, but it also represents an acceptance and recognition of Mia’s artistic identity in society. Although the relatedness between Anita and Mia is far less than that of Warren and Pauline, this professional recognition and partnership is part of what allows Mia to sustain her self-identity and feel a sense of belonging in society. These emotional and social connections together support Mia’s perseverance in her ever-fluctuating life, accomplishing a deep integration of identity and artistic creation, which suggests that “in a context of relatedness individuals are more likely to internalize ambient values and skills” [7].

IV. MARGARET’S ODYSSEY OF BECOMING

Our Missing Hearts shows how individuals struggle to survive cultural repression and identity crises in the context of a highly controlled society. Margaret’s identity as a Chinese-American poet and mother is torn apart by the violence and cultural repression of the state system. SDT theory provides a deep psychological perspective for understanding the source of her motivation and the meaning of her behavior.

A. Choosing in the Midst of Obligation

Despite the fact that Margaret is deep in a high-pressure environment and deprived of her motherhood, she does not give up her quest for autonomy, competence and relatedness, but maintains her self-existence in a covert and determined way, accomplishing the perseverance and reconstruction of her identity. Under the PACT Act, any non-mainstream speech or cultural expression is considered a threat to national security. Margaret’s poetry is characterized as dangerous, and her Asian identity makes her a potentially dangerous target for labeling. Thus, she is “the subject caught up in a world of violence, state authority and pain, the subject’s distress under the authority of another” [8], and then she was forced to choose between her family and society, and was deprived of her motherhood as a result, “so before they moved him, you removed yourself. Margaret nodded dumbly” [9]. Margaret’s departure, which appears to be an abandonment of Bird, is in fact a forced separation caused by institutional violence. At this stage, her autonomy is suppressed under external regulation, and her behavior appears to be in a position of obedience to the law and the system, but it is essentially a protection of her son’s life. However, even in the midst of her wanderings, Margaret did not relinquish control of her destiny, and she had only a hope: “someone she thought might help, who might give her a place to pause and decide what to do next. But first, before she could pause, she needed to pay respects, to apologize. To atone” [9], and instead of choosing to live in obscurity, she appeared in the “third space” in another form - as a collector and narrator of stories. This choice signifies that she still maintains an internal psychological motivation and has not been fully assimilated by external coercion. Instead of choosing to run away and put up a fight, she chose to act aggressively in the midst of repression, “what she would do with these stories, the

messages of hope and love and care and longing. She would go out and gather them, like grains of rice gleaned from threshed-out fields. She would find as many as she could” [9]. It is a deep expression of autonomy, which made she have a “tendency to be self-regulating and to orient toward the interest value of the environment and the contextual supports for self-initiation” [10].

B. Mastering Action in the Service of Others

Competence is necessary for any kind of motivation [11], and Margaret’s reconstruction of a sense of competence is reflected in the fact that she operates in an extremely subtle but determined manner. Her collaboration with Domi made her program more systematic and feasible, “together, they pool notes. By their math, Margaret must have hidden thousands of bottle caps, all over the city” [9], and she began to assume the multiple roles of planner, collector, and doer. She not only collects stories from the families of resettled children, but also makes bottle caps with speakers attentively and places them in unassuming places around the city. She acts out of a sense of competence, which “subsequently develop her skills and become more confident in her ability” [11]. As a narrator, she attempts to use sound narratives to awaken the public consciousness and bring back truths that would otherwise have been hidden; “illuminating corners of themselves they hadn’t known. Absorbing that story, passing it on. Listen. Somewhere, out there, saying to others at last: Listen, this isn’t right” [9]. These actions reflect Margaret’s proactive community-building agency and competence, and demonstrates that “narratives also foster an active reconstruction of identity” [12]. In the process, Margaret regained a sense of control over the world and confirmed her own abilities and values in her ongoing practice. Hence, this sense of competence does not come from achievements or external acclaim in the traditional sense, but from her self-awareness that what she is doing may be changing the fate of others and awakening a dormant social conscience.

C. Entwining with Motherhood and Community

Margaret’s goal is not just resistance or expression, but also to restore the integrity of the relatedness. She leaves clues to Bird little by little, leading him to come and find her, a process that is both an effort to repair the mother-son relationship and a way to support her son’s growth path. When Margaret and Bird are finally reunited, “astonished. Holding out her arms. Throwing them around him. Her warmth. Her scent. The shock and wonder and delight on her face. Bird, she cries. Oh Bird. You found me” [9]. Through their few days together, Margaret accomplished the integration of her self-existence, which demonstrated that “feeling related to others was also found to be important facilitator of internalization, along with competence and autonomy” [11]. She is no longer the mother who disappears in the system, but an individual who actively chooses to connect herself to her child and to the community in a higher dimension. Her intrinsic motivation not only sustains her through loneliness and fear, but leads Bird on a path of self-awakening. This deep connection makes her identity no longer confined to the social roles of poet or mother, but elevated to the symbol of a memory bearer and relationship repairer. In the end, through her broadcast, Margaret tells one

story after another about families torn apart, establishing a collective connection with all her listeners. Her voice becomes a medium of empathy, transcending the boundaries of geography, race, and institution, binding scattered hearts into a shared community of hope and perseverance, “illuminating corners of themselves they hadn’t know” [9]. Margaret “attempts to identify herself through interactions with others” [13], and to some degree, she is no longer merely a mother but a symbolic maternal figure that connects countless oppressed souls.

V. A COMPARISON AMONG THREE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

Through an analysis of Marilyn, Mia, and Margaret, it becomes apparent that despite existing in distinct eras and social contexts, the processes of identity construction for these three female characters exhibit an inherent continuity and intertextuality. Their life trajectories all revolve around the awakening of female subjectivity, the tensions of motherhood, and their relationships with others, reflecting a gradual progression from individual self-discovery to social transcendence.

First, in terms of similarity, all three women find themselves caught in the dual predicament of gender norms and societal expectations, and in this process, they engage in an inquiry into their own identities. Whether it’s Marilyn’s struggle to break free from familial constraints and pursue academic ideals, Mia’s practice of achieving spiritual liberation through artistic creation, or Margaret’s actions of voicing different families’ stories she collected through radio broadcasts and reconstructing meaning under PACT’s control, they all embody the self-awakening and spirit of resistance exhibited by female subjects amidst adversity. We can see the subjectivity is embedded in their lives, and that they are “beings who feel, think and reflect, who make and seek meanings” [14]. Moreover, the tension between motherhood and female identity runs through all three women’s experiences—the role of motherhood is both an inescapable constraint and an opportunity for them to redefine themselves. They ultimately all achieved a reconstruction of their self-identity through action: Marilyn sought to perpetuate her ideals through education, Mia fulfilled creative expression through art, while Margaret used her voice to evoke collective empathy and memory.

Second, in terms of differences, the three women’s paths of identity construction unfold in distinct directions and with varying depths. Marilyn’s pursuit of autonomy ultimately encounters setbacks within the gendered social structure, with her sense of competence being redirected toward the next generation, revealing an “interrupted subjectivity”. Mia’s identity is fluid and creative. Through art as her medium, she maintains spiritual independence through wandering and drifting, achieving a sense of competence centered on “creation”. Margaret’s journey, however, transcended these boundaries. Starting from the pain of private motherhood, she gradually transformed personal emotion into public moral action. Through radio, she builds a network of empathy that transcended geography, race, and identity, connecting with countless listeners. This sense of connection evolved into a spiritual bond at the societal level.

Overall, Marilyn, Mia, and Margaret together embody three stages of female identity construction: from the

awakening of self-awareness, to the pursuit of freedom through artistic practice, and ultimately to the sublimation and communal recognition achieved through altruistic action, all of which “reflect feminist commitments to disrupting patriarchal gender norms” [15].

VI. CONCLUSION

The identity construction of Marilyn, Mia, and Margaret reveals the awakening and rebirth of contemporary women within multiple social roles and cultural identities. Their respective developmental paths symbolize the awakening of female self-consciousness, the realization of self-worth, and the sublimation of the relationship between the self and the community. From the perspective of self-determination theory, the construction of female identity is a continuous process of pursuing autonomy, achieving competence, and attaining relatedness. They continually reshape their subjectivity within the tension between self and other, individual and community, thereby achieving a transition from dependence to self-determination. Through delicate narration and multiple perspectives, Celeste Ng reveals how women, constrained by social structures, achieve spiritual awakening and reconstruct their identities through the power of self-determination. The women in her works are no longer merely objects of narration but active subjects who speak for themselves—finding true freedom and belonging between self-realization and connection with the community.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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