Sexual ambiguity in *Everything I Never Told You*

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**ABSTRACT**

*Everything I Never Told You* is the debut novel of the Chinese American writer Celeste Ng. This essay, with a focus on the gender identity of Nath in the novel, intends to trace his sex-role anxiety, the crisis of masculinity, as well as his sexual ambiguity, arguing that the depiction of his sexual ambiguity is related with the author’s own racial identity, which reflects the dilemmas facing Chinese Americans in the United States.

**KEYWORDS**

Celeste Ng; sex-role anxiety; the crisis of masculinity; sexual ambiguity; racial identity

1. Introduction

*Everything I Never Told You*, written by Chinese American writer Celeste Ng and published as her debut in the literary circle in 2014, tells the story of a family formed by interracial marriage between a Chinese American, James, and an American native, Marilyn. The familial conflicts depicted in this fiction spawn the identity crises of the family members. Concerning the issue of identity crisis, Lawson holds that “each of her family suffers some kind of identity crisis” and that the family faces “overt racism of the sort that mixed-race families would have faced then” (14). Chen Yanqiong also takes notice of the issue of racial identity, and thinks of them as the “marginal man,” claiming that they encounter “various marginal conditions in family, work, social life and even inner heart” (985). Wang Fang, through the lens of existential philosophy, pays heed to the racial issue, arguing that the author reveals “the overwhelming pressure on marginalized groups and individuals” (2017). However, the identity crises of the individuals are not just some personal dilemmas. What they expose is the cultural confrontation interconnected with the social changes in the American society in the 1970s, which is the setting of the novel. In terms of cultural conflict, Haggas argues, “Ng’s emotionally complex debut novel captures the tension between cultures” (13). Concerning the social background of the story, Heather A. Willoughby thinks that the author “presents an engaging narrative that explores a time of significant change in America” (122). Terry Hong also pays attention to the social context of this novel, asserting that the author
“constructs a mesmerizing narrative that shrinks enormous issues of race, prejudice, identity, and gender into the miniaturist dynamics of a single family” (69). The above review shows that critics have mainly concentrated on the issue of racial identity, or have taken this issue as the basis and further interpreted the novel in terms of its social context.

However, in order to have a deeper understanding of the social context, the issue of gender identity, which is interwoven with the issue of racial identity, should not be ignored. But discussion of the gender issue is absent in the previous studies. In this novel, the gender issue can be analyzed on two axes. Besides the female identity of the daughter, Lydia, and the mother, Marilyn, an underlying but equally intriguing issue of masculinities of the father, James, and the son, Nath, is also worth exploring. While James is portrayed clearly as the second generation of Chinese Americans, Nath as a hybrid is presented as a more complex one with his homosexual tendency. Nath firstly faces sex-role anxiety at a transitional period from boyhood to manhood, a period during which he is supposed to shoulder more responsibilities in many aspects. This sex-role anxiety results in his homophobia, which is used to compensate for his loosened grip of hegemonic masculinity. This essay, in light of theories of masculinities and gender studies, mainly focuses on the gender identity of Nath and traces his sex-role anxiety as well as his homophobia brought about by the uncertainty of his sexual orientation, arguing that his sex-role anxiety and homophobia are balanced by his final reconciliation with his neighbor, Jack, making his gender identity a sexually ambiguous one.

2. Sex-role anxiety

In this novel, Nath is about to become a college student, and he begins to feel that he needs to conform to the role expected of his sex. Just as Joseph H. Pleck reveals, “the concept of sex role identity prevents individuals who violate the traditional role for their sex from challenging it; instead, they feel personally inadequate and insecure” (160). This feeling of inadequacy and insecurity is what males would typically experience at a transitional period from adolescence to adulthood, leading to their sex-role anxiety. This kind of anxiety disturbs Nath constantly in the process of his growth.

Though Nath has not been the economic and spiritual pillar in his family, he realizes that he should begin to shoulder more responsibilities in the family. For example, Nath wants to be a son that his parents can be proud of. For another, as the oldest brother, he perceives that he is expected to be a role model for his siblings. Putting forward the concept of “sex-role strain,” Joseph H. Pleck points out that “several kinds of contradictions and inconsistencies make it difficult, if not impossible, to conform to sex roles: life-cycle inconsistencies; historical change; and inconsistencies between men’s and women’s expectations” (142). For Nath, these contradictions and inconsistencies are intertwined in his life, augmenting his anxiety.

The contradictions and inconsistencies are firstly reflected by the fact that he is at a transitional period from boyhood to manhood. Hopes pinned upon a boy and those laid upon an adult man are different. When he is still a boy who is embarrassed in the pool, his father’s attitude toward him is still lenient – “part of him wanted to gather his son into his arms, to tell him that he understood” (Ng, Everything 91). However, when
he has grown up nearly into an adult and is still not able to meet his father’s expectations, his father becomes “cruel” – “his father has said things like this for years, but at this moment Nath feels something snap, like an overstretched wire” (Everything 198). It is at this moment that Nath realizes he is no longer a boy whose behavior can be absolved, especially by his father. Second, expectations from his father and from his mother are divergent. This reveals the inconsistency between men’s and women’s expectations. For Nath, to live up to his father’s expectations is certainly a tougher process for him. When he anxiously waits for his admission letter from Harvard, he could not help but feel the shadow cast by his father. In the process of selecting a college, “though Nath dreamed of MIT, or Carnegie Mellon, or Caltech – he’d even written for pamphlets – he knew there was only one place his father would approve: Harvard” (Everything 167). At the bottom of Nath’s heart, “to James, anything else was a failing” (Everything 167). Third, inconsistency exists in the sibling rivalry between Nath and his sister Lydia. While siblings are expected to be intimate and similar to each other, usually they are also competitors in the family in a subtle way. In the episode where Lydia needs his comfort, the author describes him as a nonchalant brother and the one that:

didn’t want to remember all the times his father had doted on Lydia but stared at him with disappointment flaring in his eyes, all the times their mother had praised Lydia but looked over and past and through him, as if he were made of air. (Everything 172)

Thus, it is noted that Nath, who is eager to be a role model for his two younger sisters by being an outstanding older brother, feels a trace of envy or jealousy when his parent’s responses to him and Lydia are divergent. These contradictions and inconsistencies undoubtedly render the conformity of the sex-role all the more trickier for Nath under the familial context, thus contributing to strengthen his sex-role anxiety. Nath is at an age when he is gradually becoming more and more involved in society. Thus, what the author reveals is also one kind of anxiety in a wider context, the sex-role anxiety in terms of his social relations. Connell, when discussing the issue of the male role, thinks, “since role norms are social facts, they can be changed by social processes” and further claims that “this will happen whenever the agencies of socialization – family, school, mass media, etc. – transmit new expectations” (Masculinities 23). Without a doubt, a lot of new expectations begin to be laid upon Nath since he is about to be a college student, and Harvard University as an agency of socialization certainly urges Nath to assume a different role.

For Nath, the process of socialization is never an easy one. It seems always to be a thorny issue for him to “fit in” (Everything 92). That partly explains why he and his father seldom have a harmonious relationship. As a boy, Nath is depicted as “too slight for the football team, too short for the basketball team, too clumsy for the baseball team” (Everything 92). His father, who is the one taking up the job of socializing his son, profoundly tastes “this first disappointment in his son, this first and most painful puncture in his fatherly dream” (Everything 92). For Nath, anxiety resulting from this also lingers upon his heart, never melting away. So what he could do to alleviate the anxiety is to do what he is good at, that is, “reading and poring over his atlas and peering through his telescope” (Everything 92). His enveloping obsession finally seems rewarding because his passionate love in them enables him admittance to Harvard
University, a signal implying that he finds a way to gain recognition and to fit in with mainstream society. This is the reason why in his sister’s eyes, “her brother himself stood silent, awed and grateful, 1981 glistening in his eyes like a beautiful far-off star” (*Everything* 170). It is undeniably his dream to be a future scientist, but this detail also conveys a hidden message that after being a college student in Harvard, he would take a step further to assimilate into society and mitigate his sex-role anxiety that has been haunting him since his boyhood.

Thus, the sex-role anxiety for Nath under the social context is a furtherance of his anxiety in the family. Attempts have been made, as readers can observe from the text, to deal with this sex-role anxiety, and the admission to Harvard seems to alleviate it. If vision were restricted to his family and college life, then one would think that the anxiety could eventually be solved. But intriguingly it largely remains unresolved because one thing frequently looms in this story – his homosexual tendency in his relationship with his neighbor, Jack, which generates the crisis of his masculinity. And it is this residual sex-role anxiety combined with the perception of the crisis of masculinity that gives rise to his homophobia.

### 3. Homophobia and the crisis of masculinity

Jack is described to apparently show his love toward Nath on various occasions. Nath, detecting the subtlety of their relationship, somehow thinks that his masculinity is threatened, leading him toward a state of homophobia because “homophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood” (Kimmel 35). In this case of homophobia, as Michael Kimmel indicates, “women and gay men become the ‘other’ against which heterosexual men project their identities” (38). Therefore, the act of “othering” is a strategy often used by males who are insecure about their masculinities. They may adopt this strategy to display their manliness and to gain a feeling of certainty. In the case of Nath, he shows the act of “othering” in two aspects.

One could firstly observe the “othering” of a homosexual. The enthusiasm shown by Jack to Nath is portrayed by the author as something quite transparent, enabling the readers to readily recognize it as homosexual attraction. While he has been hanging out with Lydia for quite a long time, his attention has always been directed to Nath. As is shown in the text, “talking about Nath kept her in Jack’s car every afternoon” (*Everything* 218–19). For Nath, in order to defend his manliness intimidated by Jack’s homosexual attraction toward him, he is required to take this homosexual character as the “other.” This kind of behavior, infused with elements of homophobia, dates back to his boyhood.

When Jack begins to live in their neighborhood – “although Nath had not yet come to hate him, he already sensed that they would not be friends” (*Everything* 88). And yet this feeling of discomfort gradually turns into hatred and finally escalates into physical conflict due to Lydia’s death. At Lydia’s funeral, “Nath lurches forwards so that he and Jack are chest to chest. Blood throbs in his right temple” (*Everything* 63). The stirring emotion in Nath’s heart in front of Jack is worth exploring. Starting a conflict with him could be explained as his misunderstanding of the reason for Lydia’s death, but it is actually more about his homophobia. Accepting Jack’s love means accepting himself as a homosexual, and then his masculinity will slide into “subordinated masculinity”
(Connell, *Masculinities* 78). This is something inconceivable for Nath, who is endeavoring to assimilate into mainstream society and is striving for a higher social status. For him, “college would be a jumping-off point for a million places he had never been, a stop-off at the moon before shooting into space” (*Everything* 167). Therefore, it is unlikely that he will easily accept his homosexual tendency, which is equal to reducing the social capital that he has long been accumulating and giving up the attempt toward “hegemonic masculinity,” the sort of masculinity widely recognized and appreciated in society (Connell, *Masculinities* 78). So he cannot withstand Jack as a homosexual showing love to him. When Jack offers help in the pool to chase off the embarrassment, Nath thinks “it was a taunt” and he just “shoved Jack aside and ducked underwater” (*Everything* 91). When he “dredges up every single thing he’s ever heard about Jack, every fact, every rumor,” he feels that “he is bubbling with fury” (*Everything* 65). When Jack is coming with the admission letter from Harvard, Nath thinks of him as “only long distrusted and disliked” (*Everything* 168–69). This series of reactions to Jack is actually not so much a display of anger toward Jack as a demonstration of hatred toward homosexuality. Thus, we can see that Nath’s reaction toward Jack is an act of “othering” of a homosexual, giving him justification to deny his real sexual orientation. However, this is just one layer of homophobia, beneath which lies the “othering” of femininity.

As mentioned above, homophobia does not just involve the fear of homosexual men. Construed on a deeper level, it also entails the “othering” of females, or feminine quality. Nancy Chodorow has revealed the difficulty of internalizing masculinity for a boy, pointing out, “a boy represses those qualities he takes to be feminine inside himself, and rejects and devalues women and whatever he considers to be feminine in the social world” (181). This demonstrates the paradox of masculinity and the dilemma of many boys in the process of socialization. On the one hand, they realize that they may have some feminine qualities. On the other hand, these feminine qualities have to be denied and repressed as a means of exerting their manliness, a quality that is usually thought to be more socially acceptable for a male.

That Nath deems feminine qualities as the “other” finally pushes him toward violence – “his fist smashes into Jack and Jack doubles over” (*Everything* 288). He does this because it is the violent acts that could render him “manly.” As Kimmel points out, “violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood” (36). Connell also notices the prevalent violent acts among men in its relationship with the construction of masculinity, arguing that “violence is part of a system of domination, but is at the same time a measure of its imperfection” (*Masculinities* 84). The imperfect part of Nath’s masculinity is that, to some extent, he has a special bond with another male peer. And only through violence can Nath exert his manliness that is being threatened by the subtly ongoing homosexual relationship, to compensate for the “imperfection.” Just as the author minutely depicts, “Nath needs a target, somewhere to point his anger and guilt, or he’ll crumble” (*Everything* 187). Another detail reflecting his “othering” of femininity is that he adopts the behavior of alcohol abuse. He drinks until “he pitches over the side and vomits both bottles of whiskey onto the curb” (*Everything* 250). Unmasked under this seemingly trivial incident is the perception of his insecurity regarding his masculinity when he is put under great pressure. Capraro, in the process of observing the connection between the prevalent problem of drinking and
masculinity, has found out that “the most prominent feature on the social landscape of drinking is that drinking is a ‘male domain’” (158) and that “drinking thus falls into a line of masculine icons” (162). Therefore, Nath can feel secure again through the act of drinking a lot of alcohol. Alcohol abuse is such a “domain” where all the feminine qualities that have been bothering him can be erased. As the writer interestingly describes, actually he is “more excited by the idea of it than the flavor” (Everything 248).

Thus, Nath is not a male that displays his devaluation or offence of females around him. Nevertheless, femininity is still perceived to be an enemy to his masculinity to such an extent that he adopts some extreme behavior such as violence and alcohol abuse, through which he is able to take women as the “other.” This is a more profound manifestation of his homophobia when he is handling his crisis of masculinity.

4. Sexual ambiguity

As discussed above, Nath deliberately isolates their neighbor Jack. However, Jack’s attraction toward Nath is not totally one-sided. As Nath’s homophobia is balanced by the eventual acceptance of his homosexual tendency, his gender identity comes to a phase of sexual ambiguity: “In language, ‘ambiguity’ is the double meaning that gives rise to uncertainty and on which the enigma depends” (Morel xiii). Morel, based on this, explores the notion of sexual ambiguity, asserting “it gives rise to indecision, and sows the seeds of doubt” (xiii). Therefore, sexual ambiguity could be disturbing because of the uncertainty inherent in it, but it is this uncertainty that allows space for sexual identity to resist any fixed definition. Interpreted in light of Morel’s definition, the author’s portrayal of Nath’s sexual ambiguity is a significant way to widen our horizon concerning the issue of gender identity.

Jack’s attraction to Nath, though unrequited, is distinctly shown and is even detected by his little sister Hannah, who discovers that it is “love, one-way deep adoration that bounced off and did not bounce back” (Everything 211). Compared with the direct description of Jack’s expression of love, Nath’s reaction is written in a vague and blurred way, prodding the readers into wondering whether Nath is a homosexual. While disliking Jack consciously, in great frustration he seems to find some consolation from him. With Jack offering him candies, “Nath slipped one of the candies into his mouth and let the sweetness seep into him and counted the freckles on Jack’s cheek: nine” (Everything 131). This “sweetness” conveys a metaphorical meaning, indicating that Nath’s long dislike of Jack is not something absolute and that his homophobia is a phase of his masculinities as well as an expedient tool to deal with the uncertainty brought about by his sexual ambiguity. As the story unfolds, Lydia’s death plunges every member of this family into contemplation about their own problems. Reconciliation is brought in the spotlight at the end of the story, including Nath’s uncertain willingness to accept Jack. The writer pictures the day when “he looks at the small bump that will always mar the bridge of Jack’s nose and want to trace it, gently, with his finger” (Everything 291). This response indicates Nath’s sexual ambiguity firstly because it shows the feminine side of him. As Connell argues, “gender ambiguity [is] not rare” in that “there are masculine women and feminine men” (The Men and The Boys 6). Nath, when tracing Jack’s nose “gently” in the course of reconciliation, is a feminine man with tenderness. Second, the writer’s depiction of it in the form of her
envisioning shows the aforementioned “uncertainty” and “enigma” that, in Morel’s view, accompany the performance of sexual ambiguity. These two factors combined make it unjustifiable to pinpoint it as mutual homosexual love. It is only a homosexual tendency that exudes a tinge of ambivalence. Hence, it is a kind of sexual ambiguity.

Thus, Nath’s gender identity represents the newly advocated idea of sexuality. The definition of sexuality has come to a stage when definiteness and certainty are discarded in this turbulent and blurry gender issue. This is primarily reflected in the deconstruction of the binary opposition between femininity and masculinity. As Connell observes, this dichotomy is a “cultural construct” and is undoubtedly not “elemental and transhistorical” (Liu 6). Second, it is reflected in the deconstruction of the dichotomy between homosexual and heterosexual. Sedgwick has critiqued this dichotomy, thinking that it could be readily deconstructed (34). When Robert K. Martin predicts the future regarding the issue of homosexual men, he also claims that “homosexuality would occur as but one of a large number of sexual expressions” and that “at that point the half-hid warp would no longer be half-hid, but an acknowledged part of the fabric of American life” (219). Accordingly, on the axis of lesbian identity, Lisa M. Diamond puts forward the concept of “sexual fluidity,” “calling for an expanded understanding of same-sex sexuality” (236). Celeste Ng, a writer born in a new era, does not present the gender identity of Nath in a rigid and conventional way. In this case, Nath does not fit into any traditional or fixed definition of gender identity. Hence, he is depicted as a person occupying a marginalized position in American society. This entails a question regarding why Celeste Ng depicts Nath in this way. In an interview, Celeste Ng connects this manner of depiction with her own racial identity by talking about the feeling of being “an outsider.” She admits, “like most Asian Americans, (her) family experienced some outright discrimination” (Ng, “A Conversation” 5). Thus, when she embarked on the journey of writing, she “drew on that to imagine the experiences of James, Lydia, Nath and Hannah, or at least their reactions to those experiences” (Ng, “A Conversation” 6).

In light of this confession, Nath’s sexual ambiguity is a way of showing the dilemmas facing the author when she was growing up, which further spurs contemplation about the difficulty of assimilation facing Chinese Americans after migration. A point worth noting is that Celeste Ng is a member of the younger generation of Chinese American writers, who has been immersed in American culture in the process of growing up. But even the group of this new generation cannot avoid encountering the feeling of being “an outsider.” Just as Cheng Aimin points out, “no matter how Americanized the young Chinese Americans are, the mainstream society represented by the white people still sees them as ethnic minorities and as Chinese, and therefore, will still always discriminate and marginalize them at crucial points” (17). Therefore, it should be noted that when depicting the gender identity of Nath, Ng approaches the perennial issue of racial discrimination. This indicates a continuation of the discussion of racial issues among ethnic minority writers. “The belief that American culture and history should be defined by Americans of all national and ethnic backgrounds,” as Tong Ming reveals, “is the basic premise of ethnic or, more precisely, multiethnic literature” (341). Therefore, the racial issue is a theme that writers from backgrounds of ethnic minorities constantly grapple with. In light of this view, Ng’s own racial identity is relevant to her portrayal of Nath’s sexual ambiguity. Moreover, this manner of portrayal sheds light on
readers’ understanding of the dilemmas that Chinese Americans are still faced with in the course of assimilating into mainstream society.

5. Conclusion

Nath has experienced some personal struggles concerning the uncertainty of his gender identity. He first encounters the trouble caused by sex-role anxiety, which, with the perception of his homosexual tendency, catapults him into a state of homophobia. This is consistent with Martin’s claim that “for [a] homosexual man, who must repeatedly observe the differences between his own sexuality and the prevailing assumptions about ‘everyman,’ sexual definition is [a] matter of individual struggle and personal decision” (xvi). Nonetheless, everything in this story is temporarily halted by Lydia’s death, which serves as a catalyst for every family member to reflect on their dilemmas, including Nath. In the final part of the story, a scene is sketched by the writer to present the reconciliation between all the major characters. However, the reconciliation between Nath and Jack is full of hues of ambivalence. The way it is presented implies that Nath finally reaches a stage of sexual ambiguity. This manner of depiction, as is confirmed by the author’s own confession, is connected with her own racial identity as a Chinese American, reflecting the dilemmas people from backgrounds of ethnic minorities encounter during the process of assimilation. As the title indicates, the author wants to tell us “everything” she “never told.” Perhaps this is among the so-called everything that she intends to tell.

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Notes on contributor

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