

The Ethical Reflection of Lydia's Journey in *Everything I Never Told You*

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Abstract: Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* has received critical acclaim since its publication in 2014, significantly contributing to the development of Chinese American literature. Centring on issues of race, gender, and family dynamics in a 1970s interracial family, this novel has attracted extensive research on themes of racial discrimination, identity crises, feminism, and family education. However, few studies have examined the protagonist, Lydia's ethical dilemmas and her path towards self-redemption from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism. Applying Nie Zhenzhao's theory as the primary theoretical framework, the present paper adopts a close textual and thematic analysis of the novel to analyze the ethical dilemmas that stem from the profound impact of dysfunctional parent-child relationships on individuals' ethical self-awareness, investigate individuals' ethical selections and their agency in navigating ethical dilemmas, and explore how family dynamics and cultural conflicts shape the construction of individuals' ethical identity during their pursuit of self-redemption. By providing insights into the investigation of the interplay between family dynamics and individuals' growth within a mixed-race family, this research also contributes to the practical application of Ethical Literary Criticism through integrating concepts from psychology and sociology.

Keywords: Ethical Dilemma; Self-Redemption; Ethical Identity; Family Dynamics; Individual Growth

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese American literature has recently gained significant scholarly attention, as reflected in the growing number of distinguished works by Chinese American writers. Among them, Celeste Ng, often referred to as “Amy Tan No.2” (Wang, 2024, p. 727) has made significant contributions to the development of contemporary Chinese American literature. Notably, her debut novel, *Everything I Never Told You* received critical acclaim upon its publication in 2014 and won several major literary awards in the United States, such as Amazon’s Book of the Year in 2014, and the Massachusetts Book Award in 2015. This novel both inherits and redefines the themes of traditional Chinese American literature. While it continues the common narrative motifs of Chinese American fiction, it also challenges the limitations of a strictly Chinese American perspective. Unlike conventional representations, Ng’s novel shifts its focus from solely Chinese American protagonists to white individuals and mixed-race children. The mixed Chinese American family she portrays is marginalized by mainstream American society, positioning its members as perpetual outsiders. Due to their differences in values, lifestyles, and race, they are perpetually caught in ethical dilemmas, and make choices that seem to defy mainstream conventions. In essence, they all endeavour, in their own ways, to escape the stifling social reality, and seek spiritual freedom. Centring on Lydia’s journey of growth, this study focuses on her ethical dilemmas stemming from family and social pressures, as well as her pursuit of self-redemption. By analysing Lydia’s struggles, choices, and ultimate tragic ending, this paper aims to investigate the complex interactions between family dynamics, cultural tensions and individual behaviour in the process of ethical identity construction. Specifically, it investigates how dysfunctional parent-child relationships shape children’s ethical behavior and examines the potential for self-redemption in facing ethical dilemmas. This study seeks to achieve three key objectives:

- (1) to analyze how dysfunctional parent-child relationships influence individuals’ ethical self-awareness and contribute to ethical dilemmas;
- (2) to examine individuals’ ethical selections when facing dilemmas and their agency in navigating these challenges;
- (3) to explore the role of family dynamics and cultural conflicts in shaping ethical identity during the pursuit of self-redemption.

In order to achieve these research objectives, this paper utilizes the novel as the primary text for analysis, meanwhile relevant theories and secondary references are eagerly brought in to enrich the interpretation and

discussion. Through the systematic examination of the novel, this study seeks to reveal the roots in ethical dilemmas by analysing key plot development and characters' psychology struggles. It also explores the dynamic interplay between ethical dilemmas and self-redemption while highlighting the thematic implications for understanding interracial family relationships and the characters' internal psychological conflicts. Besides offering new theoretical perspectives for contemporary literary criticism, the study also provides an in-depth analysis and insights into the ethical dilemmas experienced in interracial families.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* has become the focus of extensive discussion for its nuanced portrayal of an interracial family, delving into family dynamics and individual psychology. Scholars have analysed this novel from multiple perspectives, among which the conflict of racial identity and cultural background has become one of the core themes in the academic study. Through the examination of the mixed-race family depicted in the novel, Yin and Liu (2016) believe that Celeste Ng subtly demonstrates the challenges of the characters in constructing their identities in a mixed-cultural environment, especially the internal and external pressures that characters face when the mainstream society views them as the others. Chen (2017) further investigates the marginalised status of the characters and points out that Lydia's family background profoundly reflects the complex interweaving of racial identity, social expectations and conflicts. These studies reveal the profound impact of racial pressures on a mixed-race family. At the same time, they also provide important perspectives for understanding Lydia's internal struggles and ethical dilemmas. Moreover, family relationships, as one of the main narrative themes in this novel, have also attracted great attention in the research about this novel. According to Shen and Yang (2018), the characters in this interracial family are emotionally alienated from each other. This emotional distance leads them to keep secrets. The main reason is that the power among family members is imbalanced. Kairunnisa and Ariyani (2020) then explain that the dysfunctional family inevitably causes long-term parent-child conflicts. In Lydia's family, this conflict makes her develop a self-repressive and dependent personality. Despite the fact that these studies in this perspective suggest the far-reaching effect of the family environment in the individuals' psychological development, they do not explore in depth

how individuals make behavioral choices when faced with such oppression, nor the psychological motivation underlying these choices. Regarding gender topics, studies mainly focus on the psychological problems which the female characters have in the context of intergenerational oppression and social pressure. Zhou and Omar (2022) take the perspective of conflict in the mother-daughter relationship into account from the perspective of the female psychic space and colonialism. Moreover, they propose that Lydia's depression results from the combined effects of social oppression and family dynamics. Furthermore, in her article, Begenova (2023) studies this novel from the view of silence and voicelessness. She claims that the silence of female characters is not only a consequence of gender oppression, but also a reflection of their loss of identity. These studies provide a deeper understanding of the multiplicity of the pressures that women are subjected to in both family and society.

The discussion of narrative strategies provides new insights into understanding the ethical dimensions of this novel. According to Shen and Xie (2017), this novel depicts the characters' internal anxiety and ways of fighting against pressures in multiple forms of physical, social, and psychological, and textual space. Additionally, Ibarrola-Armendariz (2021) argues that family secrets play a key role in the narrative development of the novel not only by advancing the plot but also by disclosing the emotional tensions hidden from family members. Umboh et al. (2022) examine Lydia's dishonesty, and highlight that her lying is a strategy she uses to deal with her parents' expectations, while also reflecting her vagueness and confusion regarding her identity. These studies enrich the interpretation of family dynamics and characters' behavioural choices from a narrative perspective, offering insights for further analyses of the dynamic process of ethical decision-making, thereby uncovering the conflicts between family power, ethical responsibility and individuals' agency. This review shows that existing studies have undertaken extensive analyses from various perspectives in studying this novel, revealing the intricate social background and character psychology within the work. However, little attention has been paid to Lydia's ethical dilemmas and her pursuit of self-redemption from the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, particularly in relation to the interplay of parental expectations, family dysfunction, and the construction of ethical identity. Firstly, how parents subtly shape children's ethical selections through implicit expectations has primarily been described at a surface level, with limited exploration of the underlying mechanisms. Secondly, Lydia's struggles within ethical dilemmas, and their role in shaping her ethical identity have not been a central focus of research.

In particular, the process through which she rebuilds her ethical identity and seeks ethical redemption under multiple pressures remains insufficiently explored. This study intends to address these research issues by systematically analyzing the complex relationships among parental expectations, cultural conflicts and the construction of ethical identity in a mixed-race family. Grounded in Ethical Literary Criticism as the core theoretical framework, and supplemented by psychological analysis and sociological theories, the study focuses on the ethical dilemmas faced by Lydia and her strategies for addressing them. By uncovering the profound impact of family and social factors on individual behavioral choices, this study explores the possibilities of self-redemption and ethical identity reconstruction, offering fresh theoretical perspectives and practical insights for the literary study of ethical identity formation and family ethics.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ethical Literary Criticism proposed by Nie Zhenzhao (Nie, 2014) is a critical approach that seeks to understand the nature of literature and its function from an ethical perspective. It posits that “literature originates from people’s need for ethical expression” and “emphasises the instructive function of literature” (p. 13). Therefore, the primary purpose of literature is to provide ethical models, moral warnings and experiential guidance. To realize this purpose, this approach requires critics to immerse themselves in the historical context of literary works, understand the ethical dilemma of characters, and explain social phenomena and ethical dynamics in literature from an ethical perspective (Nie, 2024). In this regard, Ethical Literary Criticism provides an effective theoretical backdrop for this study since it introduces concepts such as, ethical confusion, ethical predicament, ethical dilemma, ethical selection and ethical identity. These concepts are crucial to interpret the ethical phenomenon in literary works, and employed as analytical tools to explore Lydia’s journey of seeking self-redemption. In the vein of Ethical Literary Criticism, ethical confusion, ethical predicament and ethical dilemma closely correlate with each other, forming the important aspect of ethical conflict in literary works. Ethical confusion is triggered by “the disruption of ethical order and ethical identity” (Nie, 2014). It makes individuals uncertain about moral judgments, ultimately leading to ethical predicament. Ethical predicament manifests as “the conflict in ethical decision-making” due to the result of ethical confusion. It leaves individuals entangled in ethical responsibility, personal interests,

and social norms. Ethical dilemma is the extreme manifestation of ethical predicament. It refers to a situation where an individual encounters a conflict between two value systems; therefore, it requires individuals to “make a choice between two morally valid but conflicting options”. Specifically, ethical dilemma is the result of the combined effects of ethical confusion and ethical predicaments. Therefore, in literary works, the analysis of ethical dilemma is based on the examination of characters’ ethical confusion, and in turn the investigation of ethical predicament induced by ethical confusion. Hence, these three ethical phenomena are intertwined with each other, driving the plot development, heightening psychological and narrative tension, and revealing the difficulty in ethical selection. Ethical selection, in essence, is a choice of adopting a human ethical identity or an animal identity, since humans exist as a Sphinx Factor, composed of a human factor and an animal factor (Nie, 2021). In the stage of ethical selection, the most crucial aspect is how humans use the human factor to restrain the animal factor, choosing moral consciousness over instinctual behaviour. Therefore, “the ultimate goal of ethical selection is to become truly human.” (Nie, 2014) Through ethical selections, individuals may rebuild their ethical identity. In literary works, the emergence of ethical issues is often intrinsically linked to ethical identity. Ethical identity can be categorised in various ways, such as “identity based on kinship, ethical relationships, moral norms, collective and social relations, and professional roles”. It is the premise for moral behaviour and moral norms. In literary works, the construction of ethical identity is crucial for characters to claim their ethical subjectivity (Nie, 2024). Building on this foundation, this paper also integrates conceptions from the ethics of expectation proposed by Basu (2024) and Lindemann (2016), Caruth’s (1996) Literary Trauma Theory, as well as Kant’s philosophy on lies to examine the impact of family dynamics, social structures and cultural pressures on individuals’ ethical behaviour. Meanwhile, this study also uses a close textual analysis method, focusing on Lydia’s ethical dilemma and the process of her identity construction in the novel. Specifically, the analysis focuses on key plots in the story, especially those that reveal Lydia’s inner conflicts, ethical selections, and her search for self-redemption. These plots are chosen because they play a crucial role in the development of Lydia’s ethical identity, such as her role in the family, her struggles under social pressure, and the choices she makes in ethical dilemmas. Therefore, by integrating theories and concepts from multiple disciplines, this study establishes a multidimensional theoretical framework that moves beyond the surface of the text to reveal the intricate connections between ethical dilemmas and

individual growth. This study not only examines the ways in which ethical issues are manifested but also explores how these issues reflect sociocultural contexts and human complexity. The theoretical framework provides the necessary support for textual analyses and offers a fresh perspective on the practical application and value of Ethical Literary Criticism.

4. THE CAUSES OF LYDIA'S ETHICAL DILEMMA

4.1 Ethical Confusion Caused by Trauma in Childhood

According to Nie (2014), ethical confusion happens when the ethical order is disrupted or changed. This leads to instability in the ethical identity of an individual. In this novel, Marilyn's sudden departure from home without informing anyone profoundly disrupts the ethical order of the family, leaving her family members in confusion, with Lydia being particularly vulnerable to its effects. Marilyn is deeply affected by her mother's death. When recalling her mother's life, Marilyn remembers that her mother always tries to be a good wife and mother. In the end, however, both her husband and daughter leave her, leaving her alone for the rest of her life. The only thing that remains to remember her mother is the *Betty Crocker cookbook* her mother used to flip through in her lifetime. These thoughts fill Marilyn with fury as she sees how limited her mother's life is. Aspiring to become a professional woman, Marilyn resists accepting traditional family roles like those of her mother and resolutely declares, "I will never end up like that." (Ng, 2014). Hence, she chooses to leave the family and rents a room to study alone, in an attempt to pursue her professional goals. However, Marilyn's departure is a profound psychological blow to young Lydia, making her feel abandoned and insecure from an early age. Her mother's leaving becomes a crucial trauma in the process of her growing up: "All through that long-ago summer, she had thought her mother might really be dead, and those weeks and months had left a persistent, insistent ache in her chest, like a pulsing bruise. She had promised: anything her mother wanted. Anything at all. As long as her mother stayed (Ng, 2014)."

Trauma refers to the intense psychological and emotional responses that individuals experience when they undergo significant, sudden or prolonged negative events (Jena & Samantray, 2021). It often undermines individuals' belief in life, their sense of safety and their trust in themselves or others (Caruth, 1996). Moreover, the emotional and moral pressures brought

about by trauma not only deeply affect individuals' psychological states but also force them into turmoil of identity recognition. Given that identity is closely associated with moral norms, any change in identity can easily lead to ethical confusion (Nie, 2014). During her experience of trauma, Lydia ascribes her mother's leaving to her fault, believing that her mother leaves home because she does something wrong. In response, Lydia makes a promise that she will do anything her mother asks, as long as her mother returns home. The promise gives Lydia hope and alleviates her psychological pain. However, it puts Lydia in an ethical confusion. She has to keep the promise to do anything her mother wants, but at the cost of suppressing her own needs. As a result, she gradually loses her sense of self, becoming confused about her ethical identity. Even though Marilyn comes back, Lydia is still haunted by the trauma of Marilyn's departure. In accordance with Cathy Caruth's Literary Trauma Theory, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on." (Caruth 1996, 4). This means that trauma is not merely a wound of the past, but rather a matter of unclaimed experience that resists direct assimilation into trauma victim's consciousness (Raihanah & Idrus, 2022). This resonates with Lydia's traumatic experience. The unprocessed trauma does not register as a simple memory for Lydia; instead, it becomes a persistent, elusive force that shapes her self-perception and ethical judgment. Under the fear of losing her mother, she forces herself to keep the promise: to do "anything her mother wanted, Anything at all. As long as her mother stayed (Ng, 2014)." The trauma caused by her mother's temporary departure makes her become very uneasy of her own self-worth. she is submissive in front of her mother and afraid her true thoughts will provoke her mother's ire. In a way, Lydia fulfills her mother's words: they become her unbreakable mission; she places her own needs in a secondary position and even ignores her real feelings. Finally, this insecurity and guilt grow stronger, leading her to ethical confusion.

4.2 Ethical Predicament Caused by Parental Expectation

Expectation plays a multifaceted role in both psychological and social contexts. It not only expresses the anticipation of the future, but also shapes people's behaviour and judgment (Breakey, 2022). This influence is particularly strong when it comes to parental expectations, as people are especially vulnerable to the narratives their parents create about their lives (Basu, 2024). Specifically, parental expectation not only influences

children's behaviour and decisions but also shapes their ethical identity and life trajectory in a subtle way. In certain contexts, parental expectations may become an ethical burden for children, forcing them to follow certain values or lifestyles, while neglecting their own genuine needs and personal development. As a result, such expectations may lead to ethical predicament, hindering children from forming an independent sense of self. According to Nie, ethical predicament arises in the situation where individuals find themselves in difficult-to-resolve conflicts and contradictions due to ethical confusion. It reveals the complexity of moral choices, especially when facing conflicting ethical responsibilities, highlighting individuals' inner struggle and their tragic fate of being unable to escape. When individuals strive to meet external expectations but fail to reconcile with their inner values, they inevitably face an ethical dilemma. In such situations, ethical decision-making becomes unstable, resulting in a persistent struggle between rational judgment and emotional turmoil. In this novel, Lydia's ethical predicament originates in her parents' conflicting expectations. The pressure from the expectations forms the core of her ethical dilemma. As a result, this ethical predicament influences her self-recognition and ethical decision-making. In Lydia's family, her mother, Marilyn, wishes to "stand out", in contrast, her father is eager to "blend in", however, it turns out that both their dreams are "impossible" to achieve by themselves (Ng, 2014). As a result, Lydia's parents put great expectations on her. Their expectations consistently press her throughout her upbringing and prevent her from living her own life. Marilyn has always hoped to become a doctor. But she has to abandon her dream due to marriage and having babies. When Marilyn finds it impossible to realise her dream, she finds a "sign" on Lydia when realizing that it may be too late for herself, but "it wasn't too late for Lydia." Therefore, Marilyn decides to do everything she can to guide Lydia to realise her unfulfilled dream and become an independent, successful, professional woman, instead of "shunting her daughter toward husband and house," Marilyn makes Lydia inherit her value by telling Lydia:

"You have your whole life in front of you...You can do anything you want."

Marilyn's gifts for Lydia are always books like *Women Pioneers in Science* or *Famous Women of Science*. However, this expectation is not merely Marilyn's unfulfilled dream, but more about strong ethical oppression. Lydia feels that if she cannot reach her mother's expectations, she will be viewed as not good or let down by her mother. She feels bound by an ethical responsibility to her mother, and dares not to deviate from the track set by

her mother. This responsibility comes from her dependence on her mother's love, but also a kind of fear of her mother's disappointment. Therefore, she is playing the role of being a good girl in study and life, to cater to her mother's expectations. Lydia's inner ethical dilemma emerges at this circumstance. She cannot rebel against her mother's will, nor can she find true satisfaction in fulfilling her mother's expectations. This complex psychological state causes her to lose sense of herself, experiencing a profound ethical predicament.

On the other hand, Lydia's father hopes that Lydia may blend into mainstream American society. As a Chinese American, James has undergone numerous racial discrimination and being isolated. Therefore, he wants her daughter to be accepted by mainstream society. As a matter of fact, James transfers to Lydia his anxiety about identity and his eagerness to be accepted by American mainstream society. James's Christmas gifts for Lydia are mainly books about how to socialize with other people, like *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Even his choice of a birthday gift for Lydia follows everyone's taste instead of Lydia's, because he is "so concerned with what everyone was doing (Ng, 2014)." However, this expectation produces a severe conflict with Lydia's inner state. She hopes to establish an intimate relationship with peers, but she knows this relationship cannot bring satisfaction to her inner heart. In order to satisfy her father's expectations, Lydia tries to get along with her white classmates and establish relationships. While this relationship makes her more isolated, because she cannot blend in, as people with oriental appearance are viewed as the other among her peers. As a result, she pretends to have a social life with her classmates, but the reality is that "Lydia has never really had friends, but their parents have never known." In this situation, Lydia cannot find a balance between her father's expectations and her own identity recognition. Her Chinese American identity makes her feel out of place among her white classmates. While she cannot refuse her father's strong expectations, this eventually resulting in deep self-doubt. Parental expectations play a crucial role in the process of shaping and influencing children's self-development (Basu, 2024). When parents hold constructive expectations for their children, these expectations can serve as scaffolding to support their children's growth and development. However, when these expectations are overly rigid and fail to take children's autonomy into consideration, they can be destructive (Lindemann, 2016). Overall, the holding becomes harmful when it suppresses children's self-subjectivity development, and forces them to conform to their parents' predefined image of success and identity. In Lydia's case, her parents exert a profound

ethical influence on her. They shape her self-identity through their life experience and value judgement. However, instead of respecting her ethical subjectivity and autonomy, they impose their unfulfilled aspirations on her. As a result, their behaviour deprives Lydia of independent agency and leads to her ethical predicament. In this situation, unable to resist their expectations due to her inner fear caused by childhood trauma, Lydia passively conforms, always saying “yes” to their demands. Over time, this obedience erodes her self-awareness and distances her from her true self. As her ethical subjectivity becomes hijacked by her parents’ will, Lydia experiences a growing sense of dilemma. Ultimately, these imposed wills and demands become an unbearable ethical burden, forcing her into a cycle of constant conformity while losing her sense of personal direction.

In summary, Lydia’s ethical dilemma comes from a deep contradiction between her parents’ expectations and her inability of claiming her ethical subjectivity. This conflict is evident in her passive assumption of the burden of her parents’ unfulfilled dreams, while at the same time, her desire to pursue her own ethical agency. Her childhood trauma causes the disruption of her ethical identity, leading her into ethical confusion. In turn, this confusion brings difficult-to-resolve contradictions and conflicts to her, leaving her in ethical predicament. In this situation, Lydia faces dual ethical pressures: on the one hand, she must conform to her mother’s definition of success and attempt to assimilate into the social environment her father hopes for her; on the other hand, she must reconstruct her ethical identity as an autonomous individual. Hence, to resolve this dilemma, Lydia has to make an ethical selection between submitting to her parents or asserting her ethical agency to reclaim self-subjectivity.

5. REFLECTION ON LYDIA’S SEARCH FOR ETHICAL SUBJECTIVITY

5.1 Lydia’s Ethical Selections

Ethical selection is often linked to ethical dilemma, as making an ethical choice frequently involves resolving moral conflicts. Therefore, ethical selection is significant in two aspects: first, it reflects individuals’ moral decision-making, as they strive for moral maturity and self-improvement through ethical choices; second, it involves selecting between two or more moral options, each leading to distinct ethical consequences (Nie, 2024). All through Lydia’s life, she has made two ethical selections. Her first ethical selection is to conform to her parents’ instructions and seek to be

the perfect daughter in their eyes. This choice stems mainly from her fear of losing her mother again due to childhood trauma. As a result of this psychological mechanism, Lydia gradually develops a set of survival strategies centred on meeting parental expectations. Driven by ethical confusion, Lydia chooses to lie as a means of conforming to her parents' expectations. While reading the cookbook left by her grandmother, Lydia thinks that her mother may not like it. Thus, to please her mother, Lydia lies and says she has lost it. It is this lie that leads to countless lies in her subsequent life. When Lydia enrolls in biology at college, she chooses to cheat on an exam, instead telling her mother that she cannot absorb the knowledge. While retaking physics, she chooses to lie to her mother by saying she is improving rather than admitting she is struggling. She pretends to be calling her friends at night, but in reality, she does not even dial the number. She feigns liking the books as gifts from her parents, while she "dreaded the gift from her mother (Ng, 2014)." Overall, Lydia is living in lies, lying to her parents that she is their perfect daughter, until Marilyn works out the truth when finding an open package of Marlboros and an open box of condoms in Lydia's bookbag. According to Kantian philosophy, lying violates the universal moral law. This is because individuals should act according to principles that can be universally applied. Even lies told by good intentions, such as white lies, are unacceptable because they undermine the trust that sustains the universality of truth. From this perspective, lying is inherently immoral because it destroys the moral integrity required for moral self-construction. In contrast, however, Benjamin Constant argues that moral principles must be considered in the context of a specific situation and states that in some cases, lying may become a moral obligation in order to avoid greater harm. This dichotomy reveals the ethical dilemma that when moral principles such as honesty and self-preservation conflict, the individual must choose between equally persuasive moral duties.

From the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, Lydia's ethical selection reflects this moral conflict. If she follows Kant's moral reasoning, she should regard honesty as an absolute duty, but she chooses to be self-protective and lie by instinct to avoid disappointing her parents. In the process, she exhibits the animal factor in her ethical choices, responding to ethical dilemmas with avoidance and conformity rather than rational self-construction based on moral consciousness (Nie 2021). Unlike Constant's framework, which emphasises balancing ethical decisions based on contextual factors, Lydia's choices lack thoughtfulness. She does not consciously weigh up different ethical principles, but acts instinctively out

of fear. This failure to engage in ethical reflection prevents her from establishing a solid ethical identity and ultimately leads her into an ever-repeating cycle of deception, further distancing her from true ethical self-construction. As a result, Lydia's first ethical selection proves to be a failure: she fails to achieve great success in her study as her mother expects and to form meaningful friendships as her father wants. She completely loses herself. When her friend, Jack challenges her about "What do you want?" Lydia only finds "empty". What she thinks of: "doctor, popular, happy", are all her parents' expectations rather than her own genuine desires. Through her ethical reflection of the difficulty to inherit her parents' dreams and the suffocation of being parents' favourite child, Lydia begins to find out the reasons behind all these wrongs. Eventually, Lydia makes her second ethical selection: she refuses to continue to conform to her parents' desires and instead seeks to rebuild her own ethical identity:

She will tell her mother: enough. She will take down the posters and put away the books. If she fails physics, if she never becomes a doctor, it will be all right. She will tell her mother that. And she will tell her mother, too: it's not too late. For anything. She will give her father back his necklace and his book. She will stop holding the silent phone to her ear; she will stop pretending to be someone she is not. From now on, she will do what she wants.

Through this ethical selection, Lydia finally finds a reasonable way to claim her self-subjectivity through the catharsis of her inner thoughts. Catharsis is observed as an effective way to resolve communication barriers between mother and daughter, and enhance "their overall well-being and mental health (Oreiq et al., 2024)." This decision suggests that Lydia is no longer willing to passively accept her parents' ethical instructions, instead, she wants to strive for self-identity through the expression of her subjectivity. In the perspective of Ethical Literary Criticism, this selection marks a step from ethical confusion to ethical identity reconstruction. In this respect, she also begins to work through her childhood trauma. Lydia's story not only reveals the complexity of individual ethical selection, but also reflects broader social issues. In confronting ethical dilemmas, is short-term avoidance worth the cost of sacrificing long-term principles? How can individuals maintain moral self-discipline under the weight of authority and expectations? Through Lydia's case, everyone is compelled to reflect on how to avoid repeating such mistakes in real life and how to maintain inner integrity in ethical selection, and thus, truly achieving the goal of "being human". This is not only Lydia's problem, but also a challenge that every individual must confront in their life journey.

5.2 Lydia's Endeavour of Reestablishing Ethical Identity

Ethical identity is how a person defines themselves in moral terms. It shows how they relate to their family, society, and culture. It also determines the ethical responsibilities and moral obligations that individuals undertake (Nie, 2014). In literary works, the ethical identities of characters are often revealed through their ethical selections, providing moral warnings, and promoting ethical reflections. The process of constructing ethical identities is related to individuals' moral development and directly affects the establishment of their ethical subjectivity. Therefore, ethical identity is an important part of individuals' self-cognition as well as a foundational principle for moral behaviour (Nie, 2024). In this novel, Lydia continuously shapes and reconstructs her ethical identity in the process of ethical selections. However, under the combined influence of family relationships, social expectations and cultural pressures, her ethical identity goes through a complex process from dependence to awakening. In the end, she completes her ethical transformation in a tragic manner. Lydia's ethical identity is mainly shaped by family ethical relationships and social pressures. Her mother's sudden departure leaves deep trauma for her. Haunted by this traumatic event, she believes she should be responsible for keeping the family together at any costs. Moreover, as a Chinese American in a predominantly white society, Lydia finds that she is marginalised in school because of her racial identity. Under such an ethical framework, she loses control of her own self-subjectivity because of her parents' excessive demands. She is pushed by her mother to be outstanding in study and urged by her father to be sociable among classmates. While in reality, she does not like science and cannot make friends with her classmates. Consequently, driven by the desire of being a perfect daughter to her parents, she chooses the immoral behaviour of lying. However, this ethical identity construction does not come from a self-conscious personal identification, rather a passive acceptance of her parents' arrangements. As a result, her ethical identity begins to collapse when she realises that no matter how hard she tries, she cannot really satisfy her parents' expectations and retain her ethical subjectivity at the same time. Her ethical selection gradually becomes passive and mechanical, and she no longer tries to find her true moral belonging, but falls into a vicious circle of self-repression. At this stage, her ethical identity is dependent on external demands and lacks true ethical subjectivity.

According to Ethical Literary Criticism, it suggests that the path of life is a process of continuously building new ethical identities and confirming one's identity through ethical selections. Ethical selection solves the

problem of human identity from an ethical perspective. It distinguishes humans from animals in essence and confirms human identity through values like responsibility, obligation, and morality (Nie 2014). In this framework, Ai Shiwei (Ai, 2024) explores how Jude builds his new ethical identity through a series of ethical selections in a complex ethical environment in the novel *Jude the Obscure*. Jude tries to build his cross-class ethical identity by educating himself to become a university student or enter the clergy. He also seeks to achieve the ethical identity of a free person through his marriage. However, all these attempts fail because they do not fit the ethical environment of the late Victorian era. Jude's experience shows the close connection between the construction of ethical identity and external social structures. When the social ethical framework cannot accommodate changes in individual identity, the practical effects of ethical selections are often limited. Lydia's experience is similar to Jude's process of constructing an ethical identity. Her second ethical selection marks the key moment of her ethical awakening. She realizes that her first selection is not made from her true inner desires, instead, it is driven by external expectations and fear. As a result, she decides to re-establish her ethical subjectivity, trying to break free from the way others define her identity. She no longer relies on roles given by others but makes ethical decisions based on her own values. This change aligns with Nie's emphasizes about the nature of ethical selection, which is to construct a new ethical identity through personal confirmation of responsibility, obligation, and morality. However, like Jude, Lydia's ethical identity construction also faces real-life challenges. Although she awakens to her ethical identity in her self-awareness, her sudden death prevents her from fully realizing her ethical autonomy, ultimately leading to the failure of self-redemption and a tragic ending.

In contrast, *The Joy Luck Club* offers another way of constructing identity. According to Yuting Wang's (Wang, 2024) research, the second-generation Chinese American women in *The Joy Luck Club* face the dual pressures of cultural expectations from their mothers and influences from American society. They experience a conflict in their sense of identity but eventually manage to reshape their identity through self-confirmation and cultural adaptation. Characters like June Woo and Waverly Jong are influenced by their mothers' cultural teachings during their upbringing, but they gradually find ways to balance their identity between Chinese and American cultures, without being fully controlled by the external social norms. This successful identity transformation shows that the construction of ethical identity depends not only on individual awakening but also on the adaptation and

acceptance of the external social environment. However, Lydia and Jude's failures reveal another side of ethical identity construction: when the external social structure cannot accept an individual's ethical selection, even if the individual has confirmed their ethical identity on a conscious level, the realization of this identity is still limited and difficult to achieve in reality. Lydia's tragedy further highlights the complexity of ethical selection. In her second selection, she endeavours to establish her ethical subjectivity and decides no longer to rely on external approval to confirm her identity. However, her choice fails to receive support from the real world, leading to the failure of her self-redemption. This experience shows that in an environment with strong external social pressure, even if an individual has achieved an awakening of their ethical identity in their mind, reality may still limit the actual effect of this awakening. Lydia's tragedy, like Jude's, reveals the conflict between the individual and the social ethical framework. On the other hand, the successful identity transformation of the characters in *The Joy Luck Club* reflects the mutual interaction between cultural adaptation and ethical choice, showing that individuals' ethical identity can be reshaped as they adapt to the cultural environment. Through these comparisons, it suggests that the construction of ethical identity is a dynamic process. While individual awakening is important, the acceptance and support from the external social environment are also key factors in ensuring that ethical identity is fully realized.

6. CONCLUSION

Everything I Never Told You tells the story of losing love because of love through the narrative of family ethics. It explores the ethical dilemma and emotional conflict faced by a mixed-race family from social, historical and cultural perspectives, clearly illustrating the ethical relationships between family members. Lydia's ethical dilemma is the conflict between her submission to her parents and her assertion of her self-subjectivity. In resolving this ethical dilemma, she makes two ethical selections. Her first selection is to follow her parents' will, but this choice makes her condition much worse; in her second selection, her self-consciousness begins to awaken, and she starts to rebuild her ethical identity based on her subjective will. Although her sudden death prevents Lydia from completing her full self-redemption, her resolution and courage show that she ultimately discovers her true self. Through Lydia's tragic fate, this paper reflects deeply on the complexity of ethical identity construction. It also highlights

the importance of balancing personal freedom and ethical responsibility in family education and social environment. This balance is crucial to prevent the worsening of ethical dilemmas and tragic consequences in individuals' development.

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