

Depathologising Female Depression: Colonising Women's Psychic Space in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*

Zhou Qiaoqiao¹
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Noritah Omar²
Universiti Putra Malaysia

Abstract

Women have long been disproportionately pathologised as melancholic or depressive as if they are naturally passive or deficient. Specifically, depressed mothers are usually believed to be responsible for their children's abnormality. Celeste Ng's novel *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) portrays similar predicaments of three generations of mothers and daughters. While many researchers mostly blame mothers for their daughters' depression and/or suicide, they fail to explain the vicious cycle that perpetuates the blame-the-mother myth and more specifically, the mechanism of social oppression in stigmatising women. Using Kelly Oliver's conceptualisation of social melancholy and colonisation of psychic space, this study explores the relationship between social complexity and its consequences on the psychic space of women. This study argues that Ng's female subjects suffer "social melancholy" as a result of the colonisation of their psychic spaces. Without a supportive social space where positive representations of womanhood and motherhood are valued, those female subjects regard themselves as defective and depressed. The reductionist attribution of responsibility to the mothers is criticised, as it risks individualising and decontextualising the pathology of society in denigrating women in general and mothers in particular, and ultimately rendering them depressive and even suicidal.

Keywords

Female depression, social melancholy, colonisation of psychic space, social pathology, blame-the-mother myth

¹ **Zhou Qiaoqiao** is a Ph.D candidate at the Department of English, Universiti Putra Malaysia. She teaches at the Hunan Institute of Technology, China. Her research interests are in English and diasporic Chinese literature. Email: dzhou@hnit.edu.cn

² **Noritah Omar** is Associate Professor at the Department of English, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her research interests are in English literature and gender studies. She contributed a chapter titled "Sexing Islam: Religion and Contemporary Malaysian Cinema" to *Islam and Popular Culture in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Routledge, 2011). Her articles have been published in journals such as *3L*, *GEMA*, *Ariel*, and *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature*. Email: nomar@upm.edu.my

Introduction

Diagnosing depression and psychological maladies among children, Julia Kristeva claims that “a veritable ‘buried mother’ resides at the core of their psyche” (*New Maladies* 53). She asserts that this “buried mother” often appears as depressive and stern, with whom the depressed and melancholic children, daughters in particular, usually identify and bury within themselves their mother’s silent sufferings “in the crypt of unexpressed affect” (*Black Sun* 105). Kristeva seems to indicate that mothers often become the alleged perpetrators responsible for their children’s neurosis and abnormality. For example, while explaining female hysteria, Kristeva accounts for the maternal influence on children by stating that “mother is also a counterpart to that other aspect of the hysterical psyche” and the child is “a desirable, and abject replica” of their depressed mothers (*New Maladies* 75). There seems to be a recursive regress in which the mother’s sufferings and pains are transmitted from one generation to another and then internalised by their children.

Consequentially, women, mothers in particular, are pathologised as more susceptible to neurosis.³ Psychoanalysis seems to reduce into a blame-the-mother discourse in which individual pathology comes to the fore. However, Kelly Oliver argues that because Kristeva only focuses on the children’s identification with their depressed mothers, she fails to account for mothers’ depression that is epidemic among many women (*The Colonisation* 108). In other words, what Kristeva identifies is “an infinite regress of depressed mothers” (109) where a mother’s depression can be traced to identification with her mother. This infinite regress of depression is problematic since it either indicates that depression is “a natural or essential part of the female or maternal psyche” (108) or evades the root causes of the prevalence of depression among mothers.

Moreover, it should also be noted that the very concept of mothering may be perceived as questionable because it is “defined and restricted under patriarchy” (Rich 14). Rich distinguishes two meanings of motherhood: physiological motherhood, that is “the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children;” and motherhood as the “*institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control” (13). The institutionalised motherhood incarcerates and degrades females as it idealises women only as mothers. Women who don’t comply with the idealised version of motherhood are deemed as either psychopathological or perverted.

³ According to the National Center for Health Statistics Data Brief (2018), women are estimated to be more than twice as likely as men to have depression. Past studies have also shown that the depression rate among women of colour is equivalent or higher than the rate among the white women (Carrington 781, Kuo 456).

This reductionist vision of motherhood fuels the dichotomy of meek Madonna and monstrous Medea,⁴ which risks overlooking the complexity and ambivalence inherent in maternity. At its core, motherhood “is anything other than natural and instead represents a matrix of images, meanings, sentiments and practices that are everywhere socially and culturally produced” (Scheper-Hughes 341). Considering that the individual psyche is the internalisation and repercussions of sociocultural norms, to pathologise women and mothers as naturally deficient covers up the institutional faults by ascribing sociocultural problems to individuals.

Psychologist Svend Brinkmann also notices this trend, stating: “Existential, political and moral concerns are today easily transformed into individual psychiatric disorders, and we thereby risk losing sight of the larger historical and social forces that affect our lives” (2). Oliver thus suggests that it would be more productive to examine the social-historical contexts that may lead to maternal depression and the corresponding influence on children. For Kristeva, a woman’s depression results from “a primary narcissistic wound” that one gets from one’s identification with the maternal body (*Black Sun* 186). Oliver reformulates it by adding a social dimension and hypothesises women’s depression as a consequence of “the lack of accepting or loving social support” (*The Colonisation* 122). She argues that in a sexist and patriarchal culture where women are stereotyped and devalued, their psyche would be damaged since they suffer from the loss of a lovable self-image, which fragments the ego and renders the ego ineffective and passive (121).

Consequently, woman would internalise the antagonistic values of the oppressors and deem herself as inferior and abject, which in turn denies her the social authority to articulate. In the sense that women are being excluded from the position of power and are thus denied a positive space for making meaning of themselves, they would experience what Oliver calls the “colonisation of psychic space” (88) which may incur such feelings as emptiness and worthlessness, typical symptoms of depression. That may explain why depression is so prevalent among women and mothers. Oliver points out that the pathologisation of women’s depression perpetuates the fallacious connection between depression and gender, and covers up the institutional pathology, or what Oliver calls “social melancholy... that results from oppression, domination and the colonisation of psychic space” (102).

Different from the Freudian notion of melancholy as the attachment to and incorporation of a lost loved object (586-87) and Kristeva’s notions of melancholy as the inability to let go of the maternal body, Oliver formulates

⁴ Madonna and Medea are often regarded as two extremes of motherhood. Madonna or the Virgin Mary represents the trope of an ideal mother who is virtuous and devoted to her children. Medea in Greek mythology usually represents the trope of bad mother who seeks revenge by killing her children (López 162).

social melancholy as the loss of a loved self and the internalisation of a denigrated self-image resulting from the colonisation of one's psychic space (*The Colonisation* 84). The psychic space is colonised when dominant stereotypes, values, and ideals, etc. prevent the oppressed from making meaning of themselves and deny them the social space for articulation (43). When one fails to speak up the oppressed affects through words, depression follows.⁵ Thus, depression prevalent in women can be a result of the subjugation of social forces instead of individual pathology. Based on Oliver's perspectives, this article focuses on the plights of three generations of women reflected in the troubled mother-daughter relationships in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*. It demonstrates how women's depression is induced by the unsupportive sexist and racist society that denies women positive space to articulate, thus colonising their psychic space and rendering them passive in symptoms of depression, or even suicide. This paper argues that both the mothers and daughters in the novel suffer from "social melancholy" as they are variously stereotyped, devalued, abjected by institutional sexism or racism, which is then misconceived as individual dysfunction and pathology.

Contextualising the novel: Not another Chinatown book

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Celeste Ng builds her story around a multiracial Chinese-American family in 1970s Ohio. Being an Asian-American, Ng is nevertheless not so much shackled by her Chinese ethnic background in her literary creation but focuses more on the universal human experience with enduring implications.⁶ As Ng points out: "Although the novel takes place in the 1970s, many of the issues the characters face are just as relevant today. Those who are different—racially, culturally, or in any other way—still find themselves pressured to be someone they're not" (Ng 3). Not merely confined to narratives about racial differences, Ng examines various understated tensions of being an outsider who is different and struggles to fit into social norms. She moves away from autobiographical or autoethnographic narratives that are common among minority writers and writes beyond issues about racism or acculturation. Ng's depiction of the traumatic dynamics in a mixed-race family

⁵ In psychology, "affect" refers to "subjectively experienced feelings and desires" (Buck 301). Psychologist Silvan Tomkins categorises affects into nine types, ranging from positive (enjoyment, interest), neutral (surprise), to negative ones (anger, disgust, dissmell, distress, fear, and shame). According to Tomkins, proper expression of affects is important to mental health as well as effective identification and interaction with others (Nathanson xv-xxi). Oppression operates by foreclosing the proper articulation of affects, especially the negative ones, and undermining the ability to sublimate, thus rendering the oppressed one silent and depressive (Oliver 125).

⁶ Ng's interest in the universal human experience is also verified in her second novel *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017), in which she tells the story of a white American family that involves issues about the rights and custody of an adopted Chinese-American baby.

serves as a counter-narrative to the “identifiable plot structure” frequently appearing across Asian American women’s writings (Bow 71).

The paradigmatic narrative structure that focuses on the “progressive narratives of women’s liberation” usually features a recuperative model of feminist criticism. It highlights “the subject’s movement from silence to voice with a future-oriented, salutary effect on a succeeding generation” (Bow 71-72). Writings that fall into this model juxtapose the traumatic experience of first-generation women immigrants with their acculturated Westernised offspring, highlighting immigrant children’s possibility of transcending maternal sufferings in a backward China and moving forward as a more liberated and autonomous subject in the West. This progressive narrative structure, however, is problematic since it not only reifies the binary opposition of the East and the West but also “require[s] women’s oppression to assume an air of pastness” (72).

However, throughout the novel, Ng deconstructs the Occidentalised idealised perception of the West by unmasking a less-than-liberal America from the perspective of the white mother Marilyn. Moreover, by depicting the mixed-race daughter Lydia’s plights and ultimate suicide, Ng disrupts the paradigmatic progressive narrative that highlights the seemingly assimilated offspring with increased liberty and autonomy. Rather, she brings into focus the more insidious forms of oppression suffered by both the white mothers in general and the Asian-American daughters in particular. In an essay entitled “*Why I Don’t Want to Be the Next Amy Tan*”, Ng confirms her endeavour to deviate from the stereotypical narratives of Chinese diasporic writing and to touch on issues more universal in human experience:

Comparing Asian writers mainly to other Asian writers implies that we’re all telling the same story, . . . Worst of all, such comparisons place undue weight on the writer’s ethnicity, suggesting that writers like Tan, Chang, and Kingston are telling first and foremost *A Story About Being Chinese*, not stories about families, love, loss, or universal human experience. (East 12)

Ng’s transcendence of her ethnic background in exploring universal human experiences denotes a broader perspective for ethnic writing. In this sense, *Everything I Never Told You* fits what Yoonmee Chang terms a “postracial aesthetic” in that the novel is not merely confined to “orientalist caricatures and reductive ethnographies—from the ‘Chinatown’ book” (Chang 202). Even though Ng follows most contemporary women writers’ narratives that portray the genealogical transmission of women’s lived experiences, what she perceives is not “the belief in the individual’s capacity . . . to choose a better life” (Bow 72), but “how much they’ve stayed the same” generation after generation (Ng 4), which poses questions about not the individual’s inability to change but provokes thinking about the tyranny of social institution that does not tolerate this change.

Two narrative threads are running through the novel: one is the mysterious death of the daughter Lydia at the very beginning of the novel and the reactions of people around her to figure out the cause of her death; the other is a flashback accounting the life trajectories and family history of both her white mother Marilyn and her Chinese-American father James. While Lydia's death serves as a storyline of the novel, this narrative structure locates her death in a broader social-historical context instead of the one confined to the mere personal dimension. The narration covering the long sweep of the family's history provides necessary social-historical background essential for understanding the root cause of the family tragedy. Critics' opinions about Lydia's death vary but are mostly confined to familial or individual dysfunction.

Some scholars ascribe the tragedy to the dysfunction of family, in which authoritarian parents shall be responsible for the psychological state of children (Kairunnisa and Ariyani 80). Liu Bai goes further by attributing Lydia's death to her traumatic childhood that deprives her of the sense of security essential for the stable sociocultural and family structure, thus alienating her from both family and the outside world (440-441). Wu also blames the mothers for their narcissistic deprivation of their daughters' sense of self by being a conspirator to patriarchy (37). However, to attribute Lydia's death to either the family or the parents reduces the novel to a mere "family drama", which neglects the complexity of sociocultural conditions in affecting women's psychic life and subject formation. Moreover, besides focusing merely on the daughter's anxiety of being an outsider, the novel also depicts the white mothers' plights to be othered, which is consistent with Ng's broader concern about women's universal predicament in her writing.

Ng's portrayal of the mother who wants to have full control over the daughter and the daughter who ultimately commits suicide implies that both the mother and the daughter are susceptible to social subjugation: they either internalise the stereotypical images of women in an intolerant society (as in the case of Doris), or are forced to choose motherhood over one's career (as in the case of Marilyn), or are pressed to be someone they do not want to be (as in the case of Lydia). Mothers subjugated by an oppressive society are supposed to transmit their negative affects to the next generation, which then perpetuates the problematic blame-the-mother discourse. In that sense, the plight of female characters should be attributed to social melancholy to account for women's and mothers' psychological pathology that is supposed to transmit through generations. Social melancholy illuminates how social oppression is covered up and then misdiagnosed as individual or maternal pathologies. According to Oliver,

Sexism, racism, and homophobic ideals and values in the United States produce social melancholy that is then misdiagnosed by psychoanalysis, psychology, and medical science as individual pathology. . . . The double

loss of any positive sense of self inherent in social melancholy is the result of dominant values that represent the targets of discrimination as objects or inferiors lacking any complete, normal, or fully rational agency or as abject or denigrated. (123-124)

Oliver's elaboration on social melancholy explains how sociocultural oppression operates on the psychic dynamics of the othered. Since social melancholy is inherent in the devaluation of women, womanhood and motherhood in particular, the three generations of female characters in the novel suffer from it because their positive images cannot be retrieved in a culture that subtly normalises sexism and racism. Thinking out of the realm of mere "family drama," this article depathologises women's depression and attributes them to a sense of self-abjection deriving from the pathology of a society that devalues women, deprives them of the ability of meaning making, colonises their psychic space and ultimately undermines their sense of agency.

Stereotypical femininity and colonising women's psychic space

The patriarchal construction of stereotypical femininity highlights traditional gender roles and reinforces women's subjugation to those established patriarchal values, thus serving as a means of oppression of women. Being stereotyped means that women "are circumstanced by values, meanings, and images that foreclose their agency as meaning makers" (Oliver 161) since the only meaning available for them is the androcentric and stereotypical one.

Ng sets the story between the 1950s and 1970s when gendered and racial discrimination prevailed, miscegenation was prohibited by law, and women were denied admission to universities like Yale and Harvard. Although upcoming social changes and the women's liberation movement animate American society, women and mothers suffer a lot. As such, Ng depicts her women characters as "subject position" in Oliver's terms, portraying them through certain social positions and historical, political contexts and relevance. Subject position highlights one's sense of self that is developed through one's social and historical context (Oliver, *The Colonisation* xiv). In the adverse social context, women's subject position would serve to undermine their sense of subjectivity since institutional stereotypes established at that time may largely restrain women from making meaning of themselves. As institutional forces prevent the process of meaning making, psychic space is colonised.

In the novel, Ng portrays Doris, Marilyn's mother, as a victim of the gender stereotypes in which the feminine mystique is to "seek fulfilment as wives and mothers" (Friedan 11). Patriarchal culture and institutions, via equating woman's happiness with domesticity, colonise her mind and capture her body in the fetters of a model wife and mother. Ng highlights the victimisation of Doris first through her broken marriage and then the troubled mother-daughter relationship. Doris fails to make meaning for herself as neither

her husband nor her daughter acknowledges her value. In the sense that she keeps adhering to and preaching to her daughter about the stereotypical images of women by confining the feat of women within the domestic sphere, her psychic space has been occupied by patriarchal values. Traditional gender roles have been internalised by Doris and then gradually erode her life and psyche in ways that silence the effects of oppression. Ironically, while this image of a model wife/mother means everything to her, the meaning of her life has been erased and devalued as empty and meaningless. This meaningless existence is confirmed upon her death when Marilyn found nothing she wanted to keep from her deceased mother as if no such person ever existed. Doris's whole life has been despised by Marilyn as "the smallness" when Marilyn clears her mother's house:

She thought with a sharp and painful pity of her mother, who had planned a golden, vanilla-scented life but ended up alone, trapped like a fly in this small and sad and empty house, this small and sad and empty life, her daughter gone, no trace of herself left except these pencil-marked dreams. (Ng 83)

Doris dies silently without recognition from even her daughter, who instead feels a deep sense of repugnance for her mother's life and promises never to end up like this. This aversion to one's mother or "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*" is what Rich calls "matrophobia" (235). This fear of overlapping with one's mother "can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of all our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (236). Marilyn's blatantly perceived rejection of her mother suggests the extent to which the maternal body has been tied down in bondage of womanhood and motherhood, and then devalued by both the individual and the dominant culture in ways that reduce the maternal body to a repellent and meaningless victim.

Being a woman and a mother who subconsciously internalises the patriarchal norms, Doris is belittled as a "fly", a metaphor revealing the abjection of motherhood and her failure to make meaning of her value. This kind of exclusion is silenced and legitimatised in the everyday domestic lives of women. In the sense that Doris internalises the patriarchal norms and fails to articulate the everyday experience of oppression, her psychic space is colonised. As mainstream values stealthily stereotype women and mothers, it is the pathology of society instead of individual incompetence that shall be examined. The depictions of Doris as a taciturn, almost morbid self-disciplined woman, "not only pathologise the stereotype of women, white women in particular, as passive and emotional but also cover over the social causes of women's depression" (Oliver 84). Doris dies without any trace left except the Betty Crocker cookbook. This metaphoric women's Bible on how to be a perfect

housewife becomes an irony testifying to Doris's failure in making meaning for herself except for the stereotypical image, as well as a testimony accusing the colonisation of woman's psychic space by the androcentric values.

Maternal depression and the futility of decolonising psychic space

As stereotypes colonise woman's psychic space by preventing them from articulating and making meaning, it is possible to decolonise psychic space by revolting against the stereotypical images of women. Oliver proposes ordinary female genius as the "antidote to degrading stereotypes" because it enables women and other marginalised groups to articulate and thereby revolt against the oppressive culture (*The Colonisation* 162).⁷ While Doris is portrayed as a passive figure identifying herself with the stereotypical role of womanhood, Ng seems to try to transcend the gender stereotypes to probe into the "possibility of getting beyond a mere repetition of either history or trauma" (Oliver, *Witnessing* 17) by depicting Marilyn as a woman with a sense of agency. To some extent, Marilyn is the female genius who wants to break with the stereotypes and reclaims her singularity. Growing up and influenced by the second wave of the feminist movement, she rejects the stereotypical feminine and aspires to be such a female genius. She makes a difference by setting foot in the medical profession long dominated by men with her outstanding academic performance. Marilyn's early efforts demonstrate her revolt against the gender stereotypes yet open up the possibility of making meaning of her own life.

However, circumscribed by the less-than-supportive social reality, her genius is doomed to be stifled by traditional expectations of women and mothers. What hinders Marilyn from decolonisation is that she lacks the social space supportive for women's affects to be discharged. This is evident in Pamela Thoma's criticism of neoliberal feminism that female subjects are on the one hand forced to "conform to mainstream cultural narratives of Americanness and normative femininity," on the other hand, they are simultaneously asked to "balance and regulate a revised combination of marketplace activities" (5). Being a wife and a mother, Marilyn cannot have both the "normative femininity" and her career at the same time. Wifeness and motherhood trap her in the same cage that once captured her mother. An unintended pregnancy hinders her from graduating from medical school and frustrates her efforts to be a professional woman.

Ng sets Marilyn's pregnancy in 1958. It is not until 1960 that oral contraceptives were approved. Moreover, it is not until the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case that women were granted the right to abortion. By setting Marilyn's

⁷ Drawing from Kristeva, Oliver concludes two types of female genius: one is the widely acknowledged creative writings of famous women, the other is the obscure, "everyday genius of ordinary women" (Oliver 162). It is the second type of female genius that is discussed here. For a detailed conceptualisation of female genius, see Kristeva *Feminine Genius* (2001).

pregnancy untimely, Ng indicates how unsupportive a society can be where women are forced to choose motherhood, which is then taken for granted as part of feminine gender roles. In Marilyn's case, motherhood as an institution usurps women's body and agency through pregnancy (Rich 13). This lack of social support can "lead depressives to feel emptiness, incompleteness, and worthlessness" (Oliver, *The Colonisation* 127). Left with no choice but to abide by the conventional norms, Marilyn is subject to maternal depression, that is, "a depression caused by a social context that forces women to 'choose' motherhood and then devalues it" (107).

While one's sense of self as a subject is constituted in the tension between subject position and subjectivity (Oliver, *Witnessing* 17), Marilyn's subject position as related to the unsupportive sociocultural context works to undermine her subjectivity. For Marilyn, self-suspicion and self-depreciation substitute self-confidence and self-appreciation, which undermines her sense of herself and attacks her subjectivity as an agency. She is constantly tortured by the great tension between gender roles and her career ambition. When she attempts to go beyond the expectations of patriarchal culture by running away from home to pursue her career, her duties to the family prevail. Rather than denounce her gender roles as wife and mother, she shows strong attachment to her husband and children and even feels ashamed of her "incredible wrongness" by abandoning them (Ng 138). Basically, Marilyn's attachment to the family and sense of guilt indicate "the burden of emotional work borne by women in the family" and "the psychoanalytic castigation of the mother" who is deemed inadequate and undutiful (Rich 277). This institution of motherhood creeps into her psyche stealthily and keeps her from becoming the lovable, independent, and ambitious self.

The second unwanted pregnancy ultimately shatters her dreams and pulls her back into her old and smothering life. "*This is it*, Marilyn told herself. *Let it go. This is what you have. Accept it*" (Ng 144; emphasis original). To acknowledge herself being defeated, Marilyn has sacrificed herself for the sake of her gender roles. Her predicament may well explain the "epidemics of depression" in women, which, as Cvetkovich explains, "can be related (both as [a] symptom and as obfuscation) to long-term histories of violence that have ongoing impacts at the level of everyday emotional experience" (7). In giving up the everyday revolt and subjugating to the stereotypical image of womanhood and motherhood, Marilyn's psychic space is colonised as the possibilities of articulation and meaning making have been closed up. All her efforts to decolonise her psychic space have turned out in vain.

Pathology for recognition and absence of social support

To make sense of the daughter's abnormality or death, psychoanalytical discourses usually come down to the problematic mother-daughter bond. In

unravelling the intense relationship between mother and daughter, Jacqueline McGuire discovered that “[w]omen attempted to control and direct and were more critical of daughters. Daughters, in turn, stayed closer to their mothers and demanded more attention” (160). Feminist psychoanalysts like Julia Kristeva also confirm the melancholic identification between mother and daughter, and associate the abusive mother with the abused daughter (Oliver, *The Colonisation* 111). This version of mother-daughter relation is “more or less pathological or problematic” in that, compared to the mother-son relation, it emphasises the ambivalence and closeness of mother-daughter identification and highlights its adverse impact on daughters (Stone 90).

Moving away from the vicious circle of the mother-daughter bond, Oliver attributes it to social melancholy caused by the loss of the self as an active agent suffered by women and mothers in general. According to Oliver, “if the experiences of womanhood or motherhood are absent within the culture, then the missing woman or mother self becomes the melancholic object for women” (121). This sense of loss undermines women’s sense of agency and then manifests as depression by rendering the ego passive and depressive, and even suicidal. If according to psychoanalytical discourse, the daughter of a depressed mother would appear to be an abused woman, it is because the daughter embedded with an abject sense of self believes that she deserves abuse. If a mother is abusive, it is because “patriarchal violence and callousness are often visited through women upon children – not only the ‘battered’ child but the children desperately pushed, cajoled, manipulated” (Rich 277). Mothers seem to become the scapegoats for patriarchal violence, for which the images of monstrous mothers prevail.

Instead of confining to the pathological mother-daughter bond that perpetuates the generational transmission of adverse affects, Oliver advocates a more fluid and relational notion of affects that can be transferred from one body to another. She suggests that “the negative affects of the oppressors are ‘deposited into the bones’ of the oppressed” (xix). The depositing of the unwanted affects of the dominant groups onto the othered contributes to colonisation and oppression. Because of their shared sex, daughters can remind mothers of their frustrations incurred by the male-dominated world. As Herman and Lewis point out, it is through the daughter that “the mother relives her own rebellion, her own discontent, her own shame at being a woman” (157). Likewise, Marilyn has deposited her negative affects of anger and distress towards the androcentric social reality onto Lydia, because she is the one most looks like her. Again, Ng depicts Lydia as a subject position benefiting from the women’s liberation movement: “Yale admitted women, then Harvard. The nation learned new words; *affirmative action*; *Equal Rights Amendment*; *Ms.*” (Ng 159). Like a “wannabe feminist” (Gasztold 74), Marilyn believes that Lydia would manage to fight social injustice imposed on women. However, like a

typical liberal feminist, Marilyn fails to acknowledge Lydia's identity as a Chinese American. If what hinders Marilyn is gender stereotypes, Lydia has to bear the double pressure of being both a woman and a racial other.

To some extent, the mother-daughter bond resembles the coloniser-colonised dichotomy in which the negative affects of the white oppressor are thrust upon the oppressed. Like a docile slave, Lydia "would do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted" (Ng 137), she is a colonised object to her coloniser mother. Ng shows us an abusive and controlling mother who fails to mourn her lost lovable self-image and then vents her anger and desperation through manipulation and punishment of her daughter. It is not a physical punishment but an invisible one that invokes Lydia's sense of self-guilt and self-debasement, making her feel flawed and believe that it is her fault to infuriate her mother to abandon the family. Lydia has internalised her mother's desire of becoming a doctor to the extent that she "could not imagine another future, another life" (161). As such, Marilyn cultivates the submissive compliance in Lydia, manipulates her, and denies her voice and agency.

To the extent that Lydia has been reduced to a passive daughter and fails to make sense of herself, she suffers from the colonisation of psychic space which "can be measured by the extent to which the colonised internalised—or become infected by—the cruel superego that abjects them and substitutes anger against their oppressors with an obsessive need to gain their approval" (*The Colonisation* 54). By internalising the oppressor's cruel superego into her own, Lydia produces a sense of inferiority, which in turn leads to her pathological need for recognition from her mother. Lydia's affects of anger towards the oppression are directed inward and turned into shame redirected toward herself, which is further transferred into her sense of deficiency, that is, the inferior sense that she had "done something wrong" and "would do everything her mother told her" (Ng 137). In this way, Lydia risks the collapse of her ego as a result of the internalisation of the sense of inferiority and an obsessive need for recognition from the oppressor.

Moreover, Lydia's hybrid identity even intensifies her sense of inferiority and shame. Not only does patriarchy construct in Lydia the passive female body, as it does to Doris and Marilyn, but also does racism construct in her a schizo Asian body. As Lydia recalls what it is like to be the only Chinese family in Middlewood:

Sometimes you almost forgot: that you didn't look like everyone else...
And then sometimes you noticed the girl across the aisle watching, the pharmacist watching, the checkout boy watching, and you saw yourself reflected in their stares: incongruous. (Ng 193)

What Lydia experiences by seeing herself in the white's eyes can be identified with what W. E. B. Du Bois describes as the double consciousness, one for the

body and the other for the race (5). The psychic duality of Lydia results from her internalisation of self-debasement as a racial minority and the perception of herself as incongruous and inferior. She has, according to Fanon, epidermalised the racist values through the skin. The stares from the white people force Lydia to see herself in a split schizo identity, “You thought: *Wait, what’s she doing there?* And then you remembered that *she was you*” (Ng 193; emphasis original). This experience of split identity engenders a sense of schizophrenia in Lydia and infects her with the punishing superego that excludes and devalues her. The introjection of this superego, according to Oliver, “creates a sense of debilitating double alienation [... and] commands self-destruction and undermines the seat of agency” (*The Colonisation* 105). Lydia suffers from a sense of fragmentation and is forced to identify with a self-image that has been abjected by mainstream white culture. This double alienation illustrates the schizophrenia pervasive in people from racial and ethnic minorities like Lydia, a symptom diagnosed as the pathology of a racist culture that constructs a split sense of identity.

Given sexist and racial oppression, Lydia is void of necessary social support to transfer the affects of oppression into signification. For most of her life, Lydia is a puppet whose string is held in the hands of others, which undermines her agency to sublimate. Lydia suffers what Oliver calls the lack of accepting third, that is, “the social meaning that adds a third dimension to the relationship between mother and child” (127). However, neither her family members nor the intolerant society can offer her the necessary support. Her Chinese-American father James also suffers a sense of alienation since he is too categorised as inferior by the dominant discourse. Marginalised and alienated as James feels, he keeps exerting his desire for assimilation into American society on Lydia. Rather than being supportive to counteract the abject mother, the father virtually conspires with the mother to flatten Lydia’s psychic space. Ng metaphorically associates the image of a fly trapped in the resin with Lydia, indicating her doomed fate that “[b]y the time it had realised its mistake, it was too late” (273). By the time Lydia has realised “how hard it would be to inherit their parents’ dreams” (273), she has internalised the dominant values projected on her by her parents and is unable to mourn the loss of a lovable self-image. The abject sense of self has been buried into her psyche and haunted her for a long time.

Ever since her mother went missing, Lydia has been haunted by fears of losing her family members. This sense of fear shows exactly her insecurity due to a deficiency of social support and a desperate need for recognition. The lack of this accepting third ultimately leads to a state of catatonia in Lydia for she always pretends to be someone she is not in order to repel the haunting sense of fear of loss. This sense of loss and inability to mourn are symptoms of social melancholy, which prevents her from discharging her painful affects in

language. Consequently, Lydia refrains from articulation and meaning making, which leads to the colonisation of her psychic space and depression that culminates in self-destruction.

Conclusion

Everything I Never Told You discloses woman's experience of being an outsider in a sexist and racist society in which she has to deal with various types of stereotypes. Doris's morbid internalisation of patriarchal norms, Marilyn's maternal depression for failing to break down the prescriptive gender roles, and Lydia's pathological need for recognition subtly link the psychic damages of women that linger on through generations to the racial and gendered hierarchies in American society. The institutionalised womanhood and motherhood subjugate women over generations and give rise to an infinite cycle of depression among women and mothers. Wrapped in the troubled mother-daughter relationship are the mother's transformation and execution of patriarchal violence on the daughter and the daughter's identification of gender stereotypes instilled by her mother. Consequentially, they invariably suffer from social melancholy for failing to retrieve a lovable self-image that is missing in dominant culture.

The diagnosis of social melancholy in pathologising and blaming the ones underprivileged by sexist and racist society not only disenchant the myth of generational transmission of depression from mothers to daughters, but also reveals the vicious circle of oppression against women in general by perpetuating the misconception about the natural deficit of women. What Ng reveals is a microcosm of society in which those othered women seek recognition from the mainstream culture by ultimately internalising those dominant values. Ironically, it is the very mainstream culture that denies their values as mothers or women and incurs in them a sense of inferiority that further undermines their sense of agency to sublimate. This inability to speak up echoes the title of the novel *Everything I Never Told You*, everything (the sufferings, desires, and negative affects) the female subjects fail to tell is because they are not only ashamed to speak up due to a sense of inferiority, but also because they are denied the positive social space within which their affects can be heard.

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