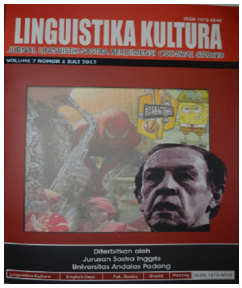
Linguistika Kultura

Volume 14 No. 1, 2025
Article Received: August 15, 2024
Accepted: June 23, 2025
Available Online:
DOI: 10.25077/jlk.14.1.11-22.2025



Analysis of The Motive of Neglect and Failed Family Communication that Build the Main Conflict in Novel "Everything I Never Told You" By Celeste Ng

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui motif pengabaian dan kegagalan komunikasi keluarga yang memicu konflik utama dalam novel "Everything I Never Told You" karya Celeste Ng dengan menganalisis penokohan masing-masing tokoh dalam novel tersebut. Untuk mencapai tujuan tersebut, penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan *New Criticism*. Metode kualitatif deskriptif dipilih sebagai metode penelitian dalam penelitian ini untuk mengkarakterisasi dan menginterpretasi data. Sumber data primer, yaitu novel "Everything I Never Told You", merupakan sumber untuk mengumpulkan dialog, kata, dan kalimat. Data pendukung tambahan dari jurnal dan artikel juga digunakan untuk memperkuat data. Masalah utama penelitian ini dapat dilihat dari perkembangan alur, penokohan masing-masing tokoh, dan beberapa simbolisme yang muncul dalam novel. Alur dibentuk dengan cara maju mundur, memperlihatkan bagaimana masalah terbentuk dan terjadi dalam novel. Penokohan masing-masing tokoh memperlihatkan mengapa suatu tindakan dilakukan, dan menjelaskan mengapa konflik utama dapat terjadi di antara para tokoh. Simbolisme yang diungkapkan pengarang beberapa kali memperkuat masalah utama yang ditemukan.

Keywords: *Celeste Ng, Everything I never Told You, Konflik, New Criticism, Plot*

ABSTRACT

This research aims to determine the motives for neglect and failure of family communication that trigger the main conflict in the novel "Everything I Never Told You" written by Celeste Ng by analyzing the characterization of each character in the novel. In order to achieve this, this research employs a new criticism approach. The descriptive qualitative method was chosen as the research method in this study to characterize and interpret data. The primary data source, the novel "Everything I Never Told You", is where the writer gathered the dialogues, words, and sentences. Additional supporting data from journals and articles are also used to strengthen the data. The main problem of this research can be seen from the development of plot, each characters' characterization, and some symbolisms that appear in the novel. The plot is formed by going back and forth, showing how problems form and occur in the novel. The characterization of each character shows why an action is taken, and explains why the main conflict can occur between the characters. The symbolism that the author expresses several times strengthens the main problem found.

Keywords: *Celeste Ng, Conflict, Everything I never Told You, New Criticism, Plot*

INTRODUCTION

The novel "Everything I Never Told You" was written by an American writer and novelist Celeste Ng. She has released many short stories that have been published in a variety of literary journals. She was born in Pittsburgh, Pensylvania, on July 30, 1980 (Yankee Publishing, 2018). She was raised in Shaker Heights, Ohio, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She holds an MFA from the University of Michigan (now the Helen Zell Writers' Program at the University of Michigan) and a degree from Harvard University. Her articles and fiction have been published in *The Guardian, The New York Times*, and numerous other journals. She has won numerous awards, including *the Pushcart Prize, a Guggenheim grant*, and a grant from *The National Endowment for the Arts.*

Ng's literary debut book, "Everything I Never Told You" is set in 1970s Ohio and centers on an American family. The book took six years to complete, requiring four drafts and one revision. While working on it, Ng stated she drew from her friends' and family's experiences with prejudice. The book was named a *New York Times Notable Book of 2014* and earned *the 2014 Amazon Book of the Year Award* (Hoby, 2014). *The Los Angeles Times* described it as a "excellent first novel about family, love, and ambition." Fifteen languages have seen translations of it. Annapurna Television was rumored to be developing the novel into a limited series in 2020. Ng and Mary Lee from A-Major Media, a production business company A-Major Media will serve as executive producers.

The novel "Everything I Never Told You" tells the story of the suffering of a family trying to recover from the grief caused by the death of Lydia, the second child of James and Marylin. Through various flashbacks and character dialogue, it can be seen that there is a motive for neglect and communication that is not carried out well in this family – one of the reasons why Lydia chose to end her own life.

According to Attachment theory developed by John Bowlby (1958) and Mary Ainswort (1978), children who experience neglect or an uncomfortable relationship with their caregivers (generally parents) tend to have emotional and psychological problems, including depression. Lack of attention and emotional support from parents can result in feelings of insecurity, low self-esteem, and difficulty in forming healthy relationships later in life (Watson, 2005).This is reflected in Lydia's behavior, which tends to be anti-social and always tries to hide things from everyone. Some previous studies related to lack family communication, including Pramono (2020) Pramono analyzes family communication patterns and their benefits for the mother school program for building a harmonious family using two methods that combine quantitative

and qualitative methods. Neglect in childhood can have a negative impact on a child's growth and development causes short and long-term health, emotional, cognitive, academic and social difficulties (Avdibegoviü1 and Brkiü, 2020).

The neglect that occurs in this family is the result of poor family communication. How this family communicates and its impact will be discussed in the research results and discussions. The writer hopes that by conducting this research he can emphasize the importance of emotional support and good communication within the family to every reader who will read this essay. This research will be carried out using the new criticism theory, which focuses on the text of the novel alone without looking at external factors. This theory is able to explain why and how the main conflict of this novel is developed, and is able to analyze motives of neglect and failed family communication in this novel, because the analysis of the characterization of each character is obtained through text without involving any external elements. The novel will be analyzed thoroughly by highlighting several points such as the meaning of dialogue between characters, the author's narration, and other details that can be seen through the text. How the analyze of the neglect and miscommunication between characters that trigger the main conflict will be the main focus of this research.

The researcher found two researchers which uses the same theory, and one that use the same object. First, the researcher found theoritical framework about the theory of new criticism from a 2017 graduating paper written by Arifah Fauziah, a student of State Islamic University of Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta, entitled “The Potrayal of Regret as Seen in Adele’s Hello: a New Critic Reading”. The research was focused on knowing the description of regret in Adele’s Hello lyric.

The second was a 2019 graduating paper written by Kartika Peni Saraswati, a student of State University Semarang, entitled “Analysis of Characters and characterization in the Compilation of Malay Poetry “Mirror”. The research was using New Criticism approach in analyzing what kind of characters and characterizations are described in some Malay poems that choosen by the researcher.

The third was a journal published by David Publishing that study the same object. This journal written by Wang Miao-miao and Huang Wei, in Journal of Literature and Art Studies that posted at july 2021 in their 11th volumes, entitled “a Deconstructive Study of Celeste Ng’s Everything I Never Told You”. This research aimed to analyze three groups of binary oppositions, which provide the possibility of rebuilding the identity and culture of Chinese-American and reshaping the healthy parent-child ethical relationship that can found in the novel “Everything I Never Told You” by Celeste Ng.

From the previous studies mentioned above, no one has analyzed neglect and miscommunication in the novel "Everything I Never Told You" as a topic of analysis. In this study, researchers will use the new criticism method to analyze neglect and miscommunication in the novel "Everything I Never Told You" by Celeste Ng.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a descriptive qualitative method to reveal the intrinsic elements in the novel. Data was collected through in-depth analysis of the text of the novel “Everything I Never Told You”. There are four steps the researcher uses to do the qualitative method:

1. First, the researcher need to read and analyze the texts: Novels are read carefully and repeatedly to understand the plot, characters, and main themes.
2. Second, the researcher need to identify the literary elements: Literary elements such as plot, characterization, symbolism, and theme are identify in detail.
3. Third, the researcher need to do data highlighting: Text passages relevant to neglect and family communication were highlighted and grouped by themes.
4. Last, the researcher need to do data serving: data will be presented in the form of analytical paragraphs.

Beside that, the researcher will use thematic analysis techniques in line with the New Criticism approach. New Criticism is an approach in literary theory that emphasizes the analysis of literary texts through close reading, focusing on the intrinsic elements of the work itself, such as structure, language, symbolism, themes and irony, without considering external factors such as historical background, author's biography, or the author's intention. In this approach, literary texts are considered as independent entities. This means that the meaning of the text must be found within the text itself, not outside the text. The New Criticism approach changed the way literature was taught and studied, emphasizing the importance of analytical skills and a deep understanding of the text itself.

In this research, the researcher will focus on four things that will bring the research to the main problem:

1) Theme:

The theme of a novel is the underlying idea or message that the author wants to convey through the story. It is the central idea or moral that the reader is meant to take away from the

narrative. Themes can be universal, addressing issues that are relevant to human experience, or specific, focusing on particular social, cultural, or historical contexts (Pippin, 2018).

2) Plot:

The plot is the sequence of events that make up the narrative of a novel. It is the structure that the author uses to convey the story and its themes. The plot typically includes an exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. There are five elements of the plot, including:

- Exposition: Introduces the setting, characters, and situation.
- Rising action: The series of events that build tension and lead to the climax.
- Climax: The most intense or critical moment in the story.
- Falling action: The events that follow the climax and lead to the resolution.
- Resolution: The conclusion of the story, where the conflict is resolved (Foster, 2003)

3) Characterization:

Characterization is the process of creating and developing characters in a novel. It involves describing their physical appearance, personality, motivations, and actions to make them believable and relatable.

There are two types of characters, namely major and minor. Major characters are those who play a crucial role in the story, driving the plot forward and influencing the actions of other characters. They are often the protagonists or antagonists of the story and have a significant impact on the outcome. Minor characters are those who play a smaller role in the story, often providing background information, supporting the major characters, or advancing the plot in minor ways (Foster, 2003). But this research will only focus on the major characters who take the largest part in building the conflict.

4) Symbolism:

Symbolism is the use of objects, colors, or other elements to represent abstract ideas or concepts. Symbols can be literal, where the object represents itself, or figurative, where the object represents something else. Authors use symbolism to add depth and meaning to their stories (Foster, 2003).

RESULTS &DISCUSSION

In this section the researcher will describe the results of research from the novel “Everything I Never Told You” by Celeste Ng, in the form of complex dynamics of family neglect and communication failure which play an important role in building the main conflict in the

novel. This novel is set in the 1970s, centered on the Lee family and the mysterious death of the family's middle child, Lydia Lee. This chapter will explores the neglect and miscommunication that occur in the novel and examines the characters' contributions to the main character's conflict and development.

In the novel "Everything I Never Told You" by Celeste Ng, the themes of family abandonment and communication failure are crucial in triggers the main conflict. this chapter will explore these elements through lens of theme, plot, characterization, and symbolism, which highlights how they relate to each other to form the narrative and character experiences.

Abandonment and failure of family communication are the main themes that drive the narrative of “Everything I Never Told You.” In this novel, the impact of dynamics on each character of the Lee family is discovered. James and Marilyn Lee's behavior of ignoring their children's emotional needs, compounded by their failures communicate openly, create an environment of isolation and misunderstanding between them. This exploration underscores the destructive potential of parental expectations and lack there of empathetic dialogue in their families. Apart from that, this novel also shows how neglect, intentional or not, and poor communication can occur causing the tragic unraveling of individual relationships and identities.

In building a story theme, there are several major elements shown in the story, such as plot, characterization and symbolism.

Plot

The novel starts with the shocking revelation that Lydia Lee is dead: "Lydia is dead. But they don't know it yet." (Ng, 2014). This sentence opens the mystery that is revealed, as well as giving an idea of what kind of family they are because there is an element of abandonment in this sentence. The Lee family—James, Marilyn, Nath, Lydia, and Hannah—lived in a small town in Ohio in the 1970s. When the family wakes up, they each go about their morning routine, unaware of the tragedy. Marilyn notices Lydia's absence at breakfast and begins to worry. James, accustomed to ignoring concerns about his children, was not too worried at first. However, when Lydia really disappeared, the entire family panicked.

In the second chapter, we can find a flashback about the background of James and Marilyn's early life and relationship. James, the son of Chinese immigrants, has always felt like an outsider. His sense of isolation deepened as he struggled to adjust to Harvard. Marilyn, on the other hand, grew up in a single-parent household with her mother, Doris, who was a home economics teacher. Marilyn was determined to break away from her mother's limited

expectations and dream of becoming a doctor. This chapter details how Marilyn and James met and fell in love, driven by their mutual desire to defy societal expectations. Their marriage was built on a sense of mutual rebellion, but this also fueled the pressure they would put on their children.

In the third chapter the storyline returns to the present, where Lydia's disappearance triggers a police investigation. The police officers interviewing the family and looking for clues. Lee's family members are trying to piece together what might have caused Lydia's death. This chapter explains the flashback of Lydia's struggles in academics, and how she tries to live up to her parents' expectations. In this chapter it is also explained that the police said the cause of Lydia's death was suicide, but James and Marilyn denied this.

The story moves back in time to Marilyn's sudden disappearance when Lydia was a child. Frustrated by her unfulfilled ambitions and feeling trapped in her role as a homemaker, Marilyn leaves the family to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. She goes to Toledo, planning to enroll in a medical school, but after realizing the emotional impact of her absence on her children, she returns home. This chapter significantly impacts Lydia, who fears her mother will leave again if she does not succeed. The chapter highlights the deep emotional scars this incident leaves on the family, particularly Lydia, who becomes obsessed with not disappointing her mother.

After that, the plot continues into a flashback taken from Nath's point of view, and explores his relationship with Lydia. Nath feels overshadowed by the attention Lydia receives. He had always been academically inclined and dreamed of attending Harvard, hoping to escape the family dynamics that were suffocating him. But despite their rivalry, Nath cares deeply for Lydia and feels guilty for not protecting her. Next the researcher can also see Hannah's point of view. Hannah is the youngest sister who is often ignored by her family, being a silent observer of family dynamics. Hannah is well aware of the tensions and secrets within the family. She noticed Lydia's growing despair and the pressure that was bearing down on her. but Hannah was always hesitant to express what she wanted to do or feel so she left everything in silence.

Then, the plot returns to the present where the police have provided the results of the autopsy on Lydia's body which was found in the lake. James, who was the first to receive this, felt sad and took it out on Louisa, a teaching assistant where James also taught. On the other hand, Marilyn becomes obsessed with uncovering the truth about Lydia's death. She refuses to believe it was a suicide and begins to investigate Lydia's life closely, looking for signs he may have missed. She retraces Lydia's steps, questioning her friends and teachers, but finds herself facing the painful reality of her daughter's hidden struggles.

And then, the narrative returns to the past to the day Lydia disappeared. It is revealed that Lydia has been grappling with immense pressure from her parents and feels increasingly protected. She has attempted to contact her classmates and develop a friendship with Jack, a boy from her school. However, these efforts did not reduce her feelings of despair. Here Lydia's final moments are described, including her decision to go to the lake, in the hope that rowing back to shore will symbolize overcoming her struggles. Tragically, she drowned, unable to return. Nath conveys his anger and sadness by blaming Jack for Lydia's death, leading to physical conflict between them. Hannah continues to observe the family breakdown and tries to understand her place in it.

The truth about Lydia's death slowly becomes known to other family members. Through flashbacks and family investigations, it is clear that Lydia feels trapped by her parents' expectations and her own sense of failure. Lydia's sense of hopelessness and her sense of isolation make it clear that her death, initially thought to be an accident, was most likely a suicide driven by overwhelming despair.

In the final chapter, the Lee family begins to face their grief and begins the healing process. Marilyn and James realize their roles in Lydia's life and death, and they begin to rebuild their relationship. James ended his affair with Louisa, and did not tell the rest of the family. Nath and Hannah also find a way to reconnect, understanding each other's pain and perspective. The novel ends with a fragile sense of hope, suggesting that although their family will never be the same again, they have a chance to heal and move forward.

Characterization

There are five major characters that appeared in this novel and influence the main conflict strongly. These five characters are all members of the Lee family, who have their own characters. Below we will explain the characterization of each of these characters:

1. Lydia Lee

Lydia Lee Lydia is the main protagonist in this story. She is the middle child of James and Marylin. Lydia's character is depicted through flashbacks and third point of view depictions. Lydia's character characterization described as tends to withstand pressure: Lydia is burdened by the immense pressure her parents put on her to succeed academically and socially. She felt obligated to fulfill her mother's unfulfilled dream of becoming a doctor. Then she was also burdened by her father's expectations, who hoped that Lydia would be successful in social life too but didn't care about Lydia's social process. Lydia also tends not to communicate well with

other family members and chooses to keep all her worries to herself. According to the novel, "*Lydia knew what they wanted so desperately, even they didn't ask. Everytime, it seemed such a small thing to trade for their happiness. So, she studied algebra in summertime. She put on a dress and went to the freshmen dance*" (Ng, 2014). Besides that, she's also hide a lot of things alone. As mentioned in the novel that, "*Lydia never really had friends*, .." (Ng, 2014).

2. Marilyn Lee

Marylin is the character of the mother of Lydia, Nathan, and Hannah who is depicted in the background as having disappointment about her dreams not being achieved. It is because of this unfulfilled wish that Marylin has a character that supports the main problem of this novel. Marylin's characterization is described as ambitious. Marilyn had a deep ambition to become a doctor, a dream she was unable to achieve due to social and family pressure, then imposed her ambition on Lydia strictly. Like in the novel where it is shown how Marylin behaved when she found out that Lydia failed the test, "*She worked through the failed test with Lydia again and again untill Lydia could solve every problem correctly*" (Ng, 2014).

3. James Lee

James Lee is the head of the Lee family, who works as a lecturer outside the city. James' character is depicted from a third person point of view. He is of Chinese descent that experiences racial discrimination, leading to a deep-seated need for social acceptance and belonging. as mentioned in the novel that, "*He had never felt belonged here*, .." (Ng, 2014). Because of this feeling of inferiority, James often hides many things to himself. As mentioned in the novel, "*He was afraid to tell Marylin these things,* .." (Ng, 2014). James's pressure on Lydia to be socially accepted adds another layer of expectation and neglect. His own insecurities and experiences with racism contribute to the family's communication breakdowns and misunderstandings.

4. Nathan Lee

Nath is lydia's brother that always feels overshadowed by the attention and expectations placed on Lydia, leading to feelings of resentment towards her and their parents. Nath is acutely aware of Lydia's struggles and the family's dysfunction, although his attempts to voice his concerns are often ignored. In the novel, it is mentioned how Nathan pays a lot of attention to Lydia, such as "*but Nath's seen Lydia at school, how in cafetaria she sits silent while the others chatters; how, when they've finished copying her homework, she quitely slides her notebook back into her bookbag*" (Ng, 2014). But despite his resentment, Nath cares deeply for Lydia and is

protective of her, feeling a profound sense of loss and guilt after her death. Nath's resentment and his observations about Lydia's struggles highlight the family's neglect and communication issues. His protective nature and the subsequent guilt he feels after Lydia's death add emotional depth to the family's conflict. In the novel mentioned that, “he had been the only one listening for so long. Since their mother’s desappearence and return, lydia had been friendless” (Ng, 2014).

5. Hannah Lee

Hannah is the youngest child in the Lee family who is described as a character who is often ignored by her parents. Hannah often feels overlooked and ignored by her family, making her an acute observer of the family's dynamics from the periphery. Such in a part of the novel mentioned that, “... *and even when she got older, now and then each of them would forget, fleetingly, that she existed* ..” (Ng, 2014). But despite her young age and perceived invisibility, Hannah has a deep understanding of her family's issues and is perceptive of the underlying tensions. Like how Hannah is depicted when she replays the events that happened to her in one day, “Hannah curls up in her bed, sifting through each detail of the day: the white spot on each her father’s knuckles as he grasped the steering wheel; the tiny beads of sweat that clung to the minister’s lip, like dew; the soft thump the coffin made as it touched the bottom of the grave”(Ng, 2014).

Symbolism

The symbolism that found in “Everything I Never Told You” highlights the theme of neglect and failure of family communication. The lake where Lydia's body is found symbolizes the hidden depths of her struggles and submerged family problems. It represents the unspoken fears, desires, and misunderstandings that lie behind their interactions. Second, there is Lydia’s pendant given to her by her mother, that symbolizes Marylin’s happiness with Lydia’s success in her academic at that time, and also Marylin’s hope that Lydia will continue to be successful too in the future. Last, there is Lydia’s blank diary that symbolizes her desire and also her inability to communicate with her family.

CONCLUSION

“Everything I Never Told You” centers on the theme of neglect and failed family communication. As the main character, Lydia Lee is at the center of the impact of the conflict.

Her struggle with extreme pressure from her parents and her loneliness resulted in her tragic death. This incident opens up the exploration of the Lee family's complex problems.

The novel explores how James and Marilyn Lee as a parents neglected Lydia's emotional needs by pushing their past unfulfilled dreams on her. James' desire for social acceptance and Marilyn's desire for Lydia's academic success and how they imposed it on Lydia without considering her desires were the main causes of the conflict. Miscommunication also made things worse for Lydia, such as Hannah's neglect which caused her to bury everything and Nath's jealousy and feelings of being overshadowed by Lydia are added to the 'silent treatment' that happened to Lydia.

In the end, this book teaches the consequences of neglect and misscomunication in a family that comes from the characters' inability to understand each other's needs. "Everything I Never Told You" is a strong reminder of the importance of communication, empathy, and acceptance of individual identity in the context of relationship dynamics between family members.

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