Condemned Isolation in Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) and Jean Kwok's *Searching for Sylvie Lee* (2019): The Failure to Blend in

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Abstract

Asian Americans have captured public attention since the release of the Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Worrier* in 1976, a memoir narrating her immigrant experience in America. Asian Americans, whether immigrants or second generation, have been facing many problems since the 1950s. Their suffering is everlasting as they are exposed to harassment, bullying, and backlash. To understand the experience of Asian Americans, two novels by Asian American writers have been chosen: Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) and Jean Kwok's *Searching for Sylvie Lee* (2019). The two novels highlight racism but focus on familial relationships. *Everything I Never Told You* narrates the story of a mixed-race family in America in the 1970s while *Searching for Sylvie Lee* is about a Chinese immigrant family to America in the 21st century. An understanding of these two novels is provided through the lens of Asian Critical (Asian Crit) framework in addition to applying the Relational–Cultural theory (RCT). After analyzing the two novels, it is revealed that the influence of Lydia's and Sylvie's mothers is more detrimental to their psychological well-being than their experience of anti-Asian racism sentiment. Lydia and Sylvie lose their lives due to the absence of healthy relationships. They are destined to experience condemned isolation which sends them straight to their death since no one recognizes their needs.

***Keywords*:** Asian Americans, AsianCrit, racism, Relational–Cultural Theory

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Asian Americans have captured public attention since the release of the Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Worrier* in 1976, a memoir narrating her immigrant experience in America. In fact, till the 1960s and the 1970s the term 'Asian American' had not been present. It came into existence when people with an Asian background from East Asia, including China, Korea, and Japan, and the Philippines led social and political movements in the United States calling for their rights (Srikanth and Song 2). As a result of these movements, the academic field of Asian American Studies has been founded (Koshy 321). Asian Americans are not just one group; they come from different ethnic backgrounds. The first to coin the term "Asian American" in 1960 is Yuji Ichioka, a historian and civil rights activist. The term was an attempt to unite all Asian ethnic groups besides refusing to be referred to as Oriental. Nowadays, it refers to both U.S. citizens and immigrants who have Asian background (Shih et al. 412). Asian Americans, whether immigrants or second generation, have been facing many problems since the 1950s. Their suffering is everlasting as they are exposed to harassment, bullying, and backlash. The American society does not welcome Asians or favor their presence. Min Hyoung Song emphasizes this point, "Asians in America have been . . . destined always to be outsiders" (3). Thus, Asian American writers insist on conveying their experience and calling for their rights.

A canon called Asian American literature appeared comprising a group of works that address issues concerning Asian Americans such as assimilation, adaptation, immigration, identity, racism, marginalization, displacement, trauma, etc. To understand the experience of Asian Americans, two novels by Chinese American writers have been chosen: Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) and Jean Kwok's *Searching for Sylvie Lee* (2019). The former is "a *New York Times* bestseller, a *New York Times* Notable Book of 2014, Amazon's #1 Best Book of 2014, and named a best book of the year by over a dozen publications" in addition to being "the winner of the Massachusetts Book Award, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, and the ALA's Alex Award" (Ng). It is Celeste Ng's debut novel narrating the story of a mixed-race family in America in the 1970s. The head of the family is James, an American Chinese professor, and the wife is Marilyn, an American housewife, with three children: Nath, Lydia, and Hannah. The story begins with the mystery of Lydia's, a sixteen-year-old teenager, death, and as it unfolds, it is miscommunication among the family members that gets them to this point. The second novel, *Searching for Sylvie Lee*, a *New York Times* best seller by Jean Kwok, is about a Chinese immigrant family to America in the 21st century. It starts with the disappearance of Sylvie, the older daughter, and as the story comes to an end, she is found dead. The two novels highlight racism but focus on familial relationships. An understanding of these two novels is provided through the lens of Asian Critical (AsianCrit) framework in addition to applying the Relational–Cultural theory (RCT).

As an attempt to understand Asian American hardships and difficulties, many intellectuals sought to use Critical Race Theory. However, others demanded a specific theory to deal with Asian American experiences. As a result, Samuel D. Museus and Jon Iftikar came up with an AsianCrit framework that focuses on the impact of racism on Asian Americans:

> The AsianCrit perspective consists of seven interconnected tenets. The first four tenets build upon

> prior CRT tenets but incorporate additional knowledge of Asian American racial realities, while the last three tenets are combinations or reiterations of original CRT tenets that are critical in the examination of Asian American issues and experiences. (23)

These tenets are "*Asianization*, *Transnational Contexts*, *(Re) Constructive History*, *Strategic (Anti) Essentialism*, *Intersectionality*, *Story*, *Theory*, *and Praxis*, and *Commitment to Social Justice*" (23-27). Only three of these tenets are detected in the two novels of this study: Asianization, Transnational Contexts, and Intersectionality.

Asianization

Asianization "refers to the reality that racism and nativistic racism are pervasive aspects of American society, and society racializes Asian Americans in distinct ways" (Museus and Iftikar 23). It deals with Asian Americans as if they are one large group without differences known as "model minorities, perpetual foreigners, and threatening yellow perils" (Museus and Iftikar 23). Besides, it classifies Asian American men as weak powerless human beings while Asian American women as obedient and sexual objects. Thus, the American society oppresses Asian Americans. Moreover, Asianization plays an important role in the enactment of laws which has an impact on the experience and identity of Asian Americans (Museus and Iftikar 23). Asian Americans are referred to as 'problem minority,' a term which was coined by William Petersen in his article, "Success Story, Japanese American Style" in 1966 (20). He discusses how the Japanese succeeded in America because they were hard workers disregarding the racism they were exposed to. The term then became known as 'model minority,' and is associated with Asian Americans who are top achievers and socially and economically successful. Therefore, they do not experience hardships, discrimination, and oppression which need investigation. They have nothing to complain about (Shih et al. 413).

In *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng depicts the stereotype of model minority in her novel when she narrates how the American society in 1983 welcomed the Chinese to work for them: "They like the Chinese, the letter said; they feel we are quiet and hardworking and clean" (41). Similarly, Kwok in *Searching for Sylvie* highlights the status of model minority in her novel when Sylvie explains she must be a hard worker, "I had to be efficient. I'd let the others take the easy questions in class and wait to answer the hardest ones. I'm Asian and a woman, which shouldn't matter but did anyway." Moreover, Sylvie narrates how her family has internalized the minority model stereotype and instructs her to do so: "They taught us to keep ourselves low, to hold our secrets as closed as an oyster. Keep ourselves apart from everyone else. At a certain point, you wind up dividing yourself internally into so many different people you do not even know who you are anymore" (Kwok). This internalization has a disastrous impact on Sylvie. She has an internal conflict: she suffers from loss of identity. Unfortunately, both James, Lydia's father, and Sylvie themselves believe in this stereotype and try to live up to the expectations of the American society. They participate in the oppression they experience. According to Erica Sherover- Marcuse, this is called 'internalized oppression,' which means the oppressed assimilates and accepts the others' beliefs and ideas about oneself (117).

Internalizing the minority model stereotype has a negative influence upon both James and Sylvie. James has an unfavorable image of himself, so when he meets Marilyn, an American woman who later becomes his wife, he is terrified "she would see him as he had always seen himself: a scrawny outcast, feeding on scraps, reciting his lines and trying to pass. An imposter" (Ng 48). James could be referred to as the Marginal Man, who according to Stanley Sue and Derald W. Sue, exerts great effort to blend in. He is trapped between two cultures, so he lives with an identity crisis. To get rid of this conflict, he disregards anything pertaining to the Chinese culture. He feels worthy and proud when befriending Caucasians and being able to speak without an accent (22). In fifth grade, James

stops speaking Chinese to his parents because he is "afraid of tinting his English with an accent" (Ng 48). Later, when he grows up, he becomes a professor of American history. Despite all his attempts to belong, he has an internal conflict which haunts him forever though he is an American Chinese citizen. As for Sylvie, she is unable to tell her family about the failure of her marriage and being unemployed; she is depressed: "If only they knew that the successful, competent Sylvie had nothing more. Would they be disappointed in me" (Kwok)? Yoo et al. mention that believing in the minority model according to some scholars causes harm to the well-being of people ("A Preliminary Report" 116). Agreeing with Yoo et al., Lee et al. confirm that the model minority may "encourage unhealthy efforts to achieve perfection'' ("The Model Minority" 75). James and Sylvie use the silence strategy as a defense mechanism. They do not reveal their feelings to anyone; they do not seek help which later leads to their psychological disturbance. They refuse to admit they have problems based on their internalization of the minority model.

There are other damaging stereotypes that influence the status of Asian Americans: they are considered perpetual foreigners and yellow perils. Perpetual foreigners means Asian Americans "are different because they are viewed as "unassimilable" (Lee et al. 76). Unfortunately, this stereotype was marketed by America during the Vietnam War; then it became popular in 1980 when America felt threatened by the thriving economy of Japan and other Asian countries (Suzuki 24). In addition, this stereotype has been present and maintained through popular culture (Lee et al.76). Likewise, yellow perils stereotype goes back to the late nineteenth century when German Kaiser Wilhelm II first employed the term to refer to Japan's victory over China in 1895 in the first Sino-Japanese War. At that time, the term called attention to the military and industrial supremacy of Japan. Later, it has been employed to refer to all Asians (Metraux 29). The impact of these stereotypes is clearly depicted in both novels. In *Everything I Never Told You*, Ng

describes the first day of school for James; a girl sitting next to James says, "What's wrong with your eyes?" (43). He looks foreign to the children to the extent that "in every class, everyday that first week, the other students studied him: where had he come from, this boy" (Ng 43)? The images of perpetual foreigner and yellow peril haunts James even after he grows up. His mother in law does not welcome his wish to marry her daughter and is suspicious: "You're sure," she said, "that he doesn't just want a green card? . . . Think about your children . . . Where will you live? You won't fit in anywhere? You'll be sorry for the rest of your life" (Ng 53-54). His mother in law's prophecy comes true. Nath, James' son, is treated as a foreigner whom the kids refuse to accept. When the kids see him in the swimming pool, they all go out, and a girl shouts out, "Chink can't find China" (Ng 90)! Kwok also depicts these stereotypes in *Searching for Sylvie*. Ma and Pa, Asian immigrants in America, are treated as perpetual foreigners: "We were isolated and without help." In Holland, Amy, Sylvie's sister, also faces anti-Asian sentiment too and tells Estelle, Sylvie's friend, that she is "used to this aggression back home and had noticed some Dutch people staring at [her] curiously, but still hadn't expected it here" (Kwok). Unfortunately, Asian Americans are experiencing an anti-Asian sentiment because of these mean stereotypes.

Transnational Contexts

Transnational contexts, the second tenet, refer to the impact of history whether it was national or international in addition to current events on the lives of Asian Americans, and how this shapes their experience. By analyzing these national or international events, which involve issues pertaining to economy, society, and politics, racism's impact on Asian Americans can be comprehended. For instance, the United States changed the immigration laws in 1965 to permit the entrance of intellectual South Asians to meet the needs of technology and job market. Another example is the alteration of the status of Filipinos because the U.S. colonial and postcolonial background influenced their culture, economy, and politics in addition to "the

displacement of many Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, and Vietanamese refugees" by the intervention of the U.S. military in Southeast Asia (Museus and Iftikar 24-25). These examples provide a greater comprehension of how racism works. Yoo et al. conclude transnational contexts stand up to the notion that Asian Americans are a monolithic group by showing the influence of immigration and imperialism on their racial/ethnic identity and experiences ("Advancing Research" 577). Ng hints at the impact of transnational contexts in her story when the U.S. decides to forbid the entrance of Chinese people: "America was a melting pot, but Congress, terrified that the molten mixture was becoming a shade too yellow, had banned all immigrants from China" (40). James' father came to California after borrowing the name of his neighbor's son who drowned in the river. In 1882, the U.S. President Chester A. Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act which was passed by the Congress. This law prevented the entrance of Chinese laborers. Then, some changes to the law were made that also forbade Chinese laborers who were already working in the U.S. from returning if they left. What caused the issue of this law is the anti-Chinese movement in California in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Chinese were working in gold mines which caused the anger of Americans. Consequently, the Chinese were compelled to move to San Francisco. Of course, this act resulted in anti-Chinese sentiment (Wu).

(Re) Constructive History

The third tenet is (re) constructive history which focuses on the significance of writing and creating historical Asian American narratives. It aims to show how Asian Americans have been exposed to racism and are shut out of American history. Moreover, it will clarify the hardships they go through, and this will make them visible, which will strengthen their identity and consciousness. Moreover, (re) constructive history will not only challenge the present historical records or revise them but also offer important foresight on the current and future status of Asian Americans and other minorities. Analyzing Asian American history helps in

comprehending the status of Asian American society and improving higher education by attracting and encouraging the participation of Asian Americans. For example, the status of the educational programs of Southeast Asian American college students can be improved by comprehending the historical clashes and fights of Southeast Asian Americans (Museus and Iftikar 25).

Strategic (Anti) Essentialism

Strategic (anti) Essentialism, the fourth tenet, considers race as a "socially constructed phenomenon" that is influenced by economic, political, and social issues causing racial categorization and racialization in society. Furthermore, it sheds light on the activities and actions of Asian Americans that influence the American scene. Asian Americans express their pain, struggle, and needs to be visible to the American society. Museus and Iftkar explain strategic (anti) essentialism could have possible contradictory influence upon Asian Americans as when they participate in activities supporting them, they will be recognized but also racially categorized. However, strategic (anti) essentialism is satisfied with these activities because it will provide a comprehension of the diversity within all Asian American communities that may induce their unity (Museus and Iftkar 25-26).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, the fifth tenant, means racism and other systems of oppression such as sexism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. overlap; thus, they influence the surroundings of Asian Americans (Museus and Iftkar 26). This concept of intersectionality was presented by the Black feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (Carastathis 305). Though intersectionality asserts that all forms of oppression are considerable and have an impact on Asian Americans, certain forms of oppression must be questioned when analysis is taking place. This application of intersectionality provides a profound crystal-clear understanding "of the ways in which social structures, political processes, and identities intersect to create certain conditions, realities, and experiences than what already exists" (Museus and Iftkar 26). Kwok presents an example

of intersectionality in her novel when she depicts the racism Ma, Sylvie's mother, experiences in America. On her way to an underground train, a white American blocked her way and pushed her to the ground saying, "Fokkin Chinee! . . .. I lay there, stunned, with my cheek bleeding against the concrete, glad to hear Sylvie weeping on my back, glad she had survived to cry". Here, racism intersects with another system of oppression which is sexism. Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge describe intersectionality: "Intersectionality investigates how intersecting power relations influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life" (12). Asian women face difficulties and hardships due to "their immigration status, linguistic barriers, and financial difficulties," and they are compelled to adapt to the new society without complaining, to suffer in silence (Lee, "Asian Critical Theory" 1582). As a result of this incident, Ma decides to send Sylvie to Holland to live with her grandma as it would be much safer there for her than in America while she struggles "not to drown in this vast ocean called the Beautiful Country" (Kwok). The intersection of these forms of oppression incites a lifetime impact upon Sylvie. She has an identity crisis and does not fit in any place.

Story, Theory, and Praxis

Story, theory, and praxis, the sixth tenet, emphasize there are three elements: counternarratives, theoretical work, and practice, that convey the experience of Asian Americans and support their cause in probably a positive way. This tenet seeks to present the voices of the marginalized in academia and to stand up to the existing imperialism. Moreover, the voices and works of Asian Americans should enrich the theoretical field which would enhance practice (Museus and Iftkar 27). The two novels of this study can be considered a form of counternarratives portraying the reality of Asian American lives.

Commitment to Social Justice

The last and seventh tenet is commitment to social justice which, according to M. J. Matsuda, is a theory calling for the termination of all kinds of oppression (1331). Similarly, the goal of AsianCrit is to eradicate racism in addition to all kinds of oppression such as sexism, heterosexism, capitalism, etc. (Museus and Iftkar 27). Yoo et al. write this tenet sheds light on the adaptation of Asian Americans to their surroundings and their resistance to change the status quo because of experiencing different kinds of oppression ("Advancing Research" 581).

Relational–Cultural Theory

As mentioned before, the two novels focus on familial relationships, particularly the mother-daughter relationship. Thus, the Relational–Cultural Theory (RCT) will be applied. RCT was developed by four counselors: Jean Baker Miller, Irene Stiver, Janet Surrey, and Judith Jordan in 1978 (Jordan, "Relational-Cultural Theory: The Power" 232). It depends "on aspects of psychodynamic and feminist theory in developing a relational model that emphasizes the primacy of human connection and relationships" (Carlson and Englar Carlson xi- xii). Its main focus, according to Judith Jordan, is on human connection and its importance regarding one's well-being. In addition, RCT challenges the main characteristics of "21st-century Western culture, which celebrate autonomy, self-interest, competition, and strength in isolation" (*Relational Cultural Therapy* 4). To lead a good and healthy life, people need each other because isolation is harmful and will cause chronic stress and disconnection. RCT assumes the growth of people occurs in relationships, and the development of the relationship is based on the problems, difficulties, and the expressions of feelings people experience. So, there are no fixed stages that a relationship goes through; it is all about mutuality (Jordan, *Relational Cultural Therapy* 7).

Mutual Empathy

Mutuality is essential in comprehending the dynamics of RCT. Jordan states, "Mutual empathy involves mutual impact,

mutual care, and mutual responsiveness" (*Relational Cultural Therapy* 7). Thus, in a healthy relationship two people must influence, provide care, and respond to each other otherwise it will not be a growth-fostering relationship, and they will have to look for other mutual relationships. It is not necessary for the individuals to exert equal effort in a relationship, but each one can feel the other is doing his/ her best to meet the other's needs. According to Jean Miller, there are five signs that a relationship is developing well: "zest, act right in the relationship, knowledge, sense of worth, and greater sense of connection and the motivation for more connection" (3). First, zest is "the emotion- the feeling- which comes when we feel a real sense of connection with another person" (8). Second, action is "to act right in the immediate relationship" (9). When people act, they influence each other. Third, knowledge means each person has a clear vision and an understanding of himself/ herself and the other person (10). Fourth, sense of worth refers to the recognition of others' needs, showing them you care and support them. Fifth, greater sense of connection and the motivation for more connection results due to the presence of the previous four signs: "It is the active, outgoing feeling of caring about another person because that person is so valued in our eyes" (*What Do We Mean by Relationships?* 11).

Looking at the two novels, the problems that exist are due to the absence of mutual empathy which depend on the presence of Miller's five signs between the girls, Lydia and Sylvie, and their families. *Everything I Never Told you* starts with the death of Lydia which is a mystery. When the detective inquires about Lydia hinting she might have committed suicide, Marilyn dismisses the idea: "Lydia was very happy. She loved school. She could have done anything. She'd never go out in that boat by herself" (Ng 10). Marilyn truly believes Lydia was happy not knowing she was suffering. Actually, the suffering begins when Lydia was a little child who wakes up one day to find her mother gone without an explanation. Marilyn's absence has a great impact upon both her

kids Lydia and Nath. Ng writes, "Their mother's absence gnawed at them quietly, a dull and spreading hurt" (130). Marilyn realizes she is not going to spend the rest of her life being a mother, and she has another role to fulfill which is studying medicine, so she leaves her family. Since she leaves, Lydia believes she and Nath have upset her, and she is angry with them though James, their father, confirms it is not their fault. However, Lydia makes up her mind if her mother returns, she "would do everything her mother told her. Everything her mother wanted" (Ng 137). Marilyn turns out to be pregnant and sees it is too late to start over, so she returns to her family but determined to achieve her dream through Lydia:

> She would spend the rest of her years guiding Lydia, sheltering her, the way you tended a prize rose. . .. Never to tell her to sit up straight, to find a husband, to keep a house. Never to suggest that there were jobs or lives or worlds not meant for her; never to let her hear doctor and think only man. To encourage her, for the rest of her life, to do more than her mother had. (Ng 147)

This care Marilyn decides to provide for Lydia leads to negative consequences. Marilyn pressures her to study hard and does not pay attention to her needs: "In her mind, Marilyn spun out Lydia's future in one long golden thread, the future she was positive her daughter wanted, too" (Ng 152). Lydia is overloaded with Marilyn and James's wishes and is afraid to let Marilyn down causing her to disappear once again. James wants her to blend in and believes the mission to be easy as she has got Marilyn's blue eyes. Ng writes, "She absorbed her parents' dreams, quieting the reluctance that bubbled up within. Years passed. . .Lydia knew what they wanted so desperately, even when they didn't ask. Every time, it seemed such a small thing to trade for their happiness" (160). Lydia is in deep need of a connection with Marilyn and James who unfortunately fail her. She feels isolated because, as Jordan explains, society instructs us to hide our weaknesses and to disregard connection resulting in a huge sense of isolation and a fake life ("Relational–Cultural Theory:

The Power" 236-7). Lydia needs her parents to understand her feelings and find out what she truly wants. She is unable to tell her parents she is deeply disappointed with them guiding her towards their dreams not hers.

In *Searching for Sylvie Lee*, Sylvie just like Lydia seeks connection with her mother: "Ma cared nothing for what I did. . .. I often left the apartment without eating breakfast because I wanted, just once to hear Ma's soft voice say, 'Sylvie come back,' but she never did" (Kwok). She feels she has been brought back from Holland to look after her little sister, Amy. On the other hand, Ma thinks Sylvie does not like the food; she says, "I made my girls sweet egg drop soup on wintry days but Sylvie scorned it, sweeping out the door most mornings without a mouthful. I accepted this, knowing she was accustomed to better food from Helena" (Kwok). There is a misunderstanding between Sylvie and her mother. Ma believes as she does not understand English and the American culture well, then, she cannot communicate with Sylvie and Amy: "I was, after all, only a simple woman from a little village in China" (Kwok). Sylvie has a constant feeling whatever she is doing to help her family was not enough: "But all of it was a nightmare: Jim; the consultancy firm; the desperate, futile struggle for Ma and Pa's love and approval" (Kwok). She wants to run away from her life. According to Jordan, the absence of mutuality causes pain for many people. Thus, in a relationship, when a person feels he/she is giving, providing care and respect, and the other person does not show appreciation, he/ she may suffer from depression. The idea is that we are not looking for thanks or wanting to be excessively valued, but we need mutuality in a relationship. We need to feel we influence each other, we make a difference, and we matter to each other. If this is achieved, then the relationship will be healthy and promote the growth of individuals. "Mutual empathy is the process in which each person empathizes with the other in mutual growth" ("Relational Resilience" 84).

Acute Disconnections

Acute disconnections, as Jordan explains, occur, and if they are successfully handled then the relationship can be characterized by a strong connection. So, when do acute disconnections occur? They occur when people fail many times to understand each other's needs and feelings (Jordan "A Relational-Cultural Model" 95). Both Lydia and Sylvie experience acute disconnection because their parents do not respond to their needs or show appreciation. Therefore, they believe they do not influence their parents or matter to them. They are psychologically disturbed and suffer from depression. Jordan writes when a child is neglected by his/ her parents, disconnection occurs, and the child starts to blame himself/ herself, and his/ her point of view about the world changes. He/ she loses the sense of security as his/ her parents do not consider his/her needs and feelings. So, when parents fail to understand their children, the children feel incompetent and vulnerable which results in acute or chronic disconnection. Chronic disconnections "actually move people into isolation, self-blame, and immobilization, the hallmarks of what clinicians call pathology" ("A Relational-Cultural Model" 96). Sylvie blames herself when her parents do not respond to her needs in the way she would have liked: "I realized then that perhaps I had not been working so hard all these years just to earn the love of Ma and Pa, but to become an equal adversary to Helena" (Kwok). Jordan elaborates on the chronic disconnection saying in the relational-cultural model, the strategies of disconnection are considered strategies of survival because the child is in desperate need of some kind of connection with his/ her parents though this connection is not authentic. He/ she decides to dispense with his/ her needs to maintain a relationship with his/her parents. This is called the paradox of connection ("A Relational-Cultural Model" 96). Lydia dreams of having gifts other than books, a necklace for a change: "A necklace from her father would be like that. . .. It would be a little reminder that said *I love you. You're perfect just as you are"* (Ng 176). Lydia is in critical need of love. In a relationship, as Jordan explains, where there is paradox of connection the person

seeks stronger connection with the caregivers while being terrified by losing it. The person experiences two contradictory feelings: the desperate need for connection and fear of the consequences of this connection ("A Relational Cultural Model" 96). Lydia reluctantly chooses to stay out of any relationship with other kids for the sake of responding to her mother's wish to always study hard: "She would say no to birthday parties, to roller-skating, to swimming at the rec center to everything. . .. By the second grade, the other girls stopped asking. She told herself she didn't care: her mother was still there. That was all that mattered" (Ng 165-166). When Lydia grows up, she discovers her inability to bear the stress of responding to her mother's wish, but at the same time she needs to connect with her and does not want to upset her.

The paradox of connection and acute disconnection does not only take place at the personal level but also at the societal level. In any society, people are influenced by the powerful majority's beliefs and opinions, so the less powerful maintain connection but do not show their true selves. In many cases, they choose to remain silent. Thus, they become marginalized because the powerful impose their perspectives which, of course, have negative consequences upon both the individual and the society. This acute disconnection is, according to Miller and Stiver 1997, characterized by "drop in energy, lack of clarity, withdrawal from social engagement, feelings of depression, and lower levels of creativity and productivity" (qtd. in Jordan, "A Relational-Cultural Model" 97). Both Lydia and Sylvie undergo acute disconnection at the societal level because they are Asian Americans. Lydia faces racism at school when a girl asks her, "Do Chinese people celebrate Thanksgiving? And: "Do Chinese people have belly buttons" (Ng 165). The girl does not wait for a reply and invites Lydia to come over to her house, but after thinking Lydia rejects the invitation because she is afraid the purpose of the invitation might be a prank. Though Lydia's mother is American, racism accompanies her

wherever she goes. When asked what it feels to be Asian America, she remembers:

> Every time you saw yourself from the outside, the way other people see you, you remembered all over again. You saw it in the sign at the Perking Express—a cartoon man with a coolie hat, slant eyes, buckteeth, and chopsticks. You saw it in the little boys on the playground, stretching their eyes to slits with their fingers—*Chinese*—*Japanese*—look at these—and in the older boys who muttered *ching chong ching chong ching* as they passed you on the street, just loud enough for you to hear. You saw it with waitresses and policemen and bus drivers spoke slowly to you, in simple words, as if you might not understand. (Ng 193).

Shame overwhelms Lydia because she internalizes the white society's perspective as being a model minority, perpetual foreigner, and a yellow peril. She is absolutely shattered.

Sylvie also faces racism in Holland and America. In Holland, the girls bully her: "Some of the girls used to call me a 'poop Chinese'" (Kwok). In America, the kids either tease or ignore her, and once a girl hits her but what aches her is not the bruise she gets but the teacher's reaction that supports racism: "The worst was, the teacher yelled at me for fighting not her. I went home trying so hard not to cry and Amy jumped into my arms and everything was all right" (Kwok). Moreover, when Sylvie goes to college and has a relationship, she discovers her boyfriend "was a member of the groups that disdained [her]" (Kwok). Despite these awful experiences, she is trying to maintain a relationship with the powerful majority: "All of my designer things, buying into the myth that if you owned the right items, you would belong" (Kwok). Thus, she is lost and does not have a clear perspective about her life. Depression controls her actions resulting in distancing herself from others. Sylvie tells her friends in Holland, "I don't really have friends back home" (Kwok), and later adds, "It is my fault. I keep

them at a distance" (Kwok). Jordan explains, "Racism, homophobia, class, prejudice, and sexism all instigate chronic disconnections that create pain and drain energy in individuals and societies" (*Relational Cultural Therapy* 9). Similarly, Comstock et al. write relational contexts are influenced by one's racial or social or cultural identity, and it is crucial to know "cultural oppression, marginalization, and various forms of social injustice lead to feelings of isolation, shame, and humiliation among persons from devalued groups" (280). Thus, all these factors affect Lydia and Sylvie; they lack energy and feel pain since they are unable to connect at both the personal and societal levels.

Condemned Isolation

'Condemned isolation,' a term created by Miller, results from chronic disconnections. It is "feeling locked out of the possibility of human connection. This feeling of desperate loneliness is usually accompanied by the feeling that you, yourself, are the reason for exclusion. It is because of *who* you are. And you feel helpless, powerless, unable to act to change the situation" (*Connections* 7). In other words, it is when a person sees he/she is neglected, unappreciated, unable to influence others; he/she feels worthless. Jordan stresses the importance of connections in achieving a psychologically stable life because she observes our need for connections is like our need for water or oxygen. So, to survive we need all these things. Moreover, the pain that results from disconnections should be a warning for us to try to connect with others to be able to survive. Connecting with others is the gate to our survival in stressful or dangerous situations ("Relational–Cultural Theory" 237). Lydia and Sylvie do not survive because they undergo condemned isolation. When Lydia fails to connect with her parents who are busy concentrating on their needs, she tries to connect with Nath. Ng writes, "Lydia rapped at his door, silent and miserable. He understood everything she did not say, which at its core was: *Don't let go*" (160). Despite her attempt to make him stay, Nath is going to leave for college; he wants to run away from a

house that does not care about him. As he leaves, Lydia's life crumbles because "only Nath had made it bearable all that time" (165). Her last resort to find salvation is gone. Jordan mentions having others to count on or seek in times of stress provides solace ("Relational–Cultural Theory" 238). Lydia cannot find any source of comfort at home. Also, Sylvie fails in finding any source of comfort: "I poured my grief, pain, and ugliness, my misinformed eye into my playing" (Kwok). When Sylvie fails to connect with her parents, especially her mother, she seeks to find someone else, and she does marry Jim because she "was starved for affection" (Kwok). Unfortunately, he betrays her. Consequently, she moves into a state of condemned isolation due to her sense of worthlessness. Moreover, shame accompanies disconnections which causes "isolation and thus disempowers and immobilizes people" (Jordan, "Relational Resilience" 85). When people feel shame, they feel they do not deserve love. Internally, they believe they have defects, and no one can understand them. They keep silent and are unable to reconnect once again" (Jordan, "Relational Resilience" 85). Just as Lydia tries to resume connection with Nath, Sylvie tries to connect with Lukas, her relative, whom she lived with when she was a child. As their relationship develops, they discover they are brother and sister from different mothers, a shocking revelation which sends Sylvie to her death. She commits suicide as she concludes she is destined for ruin: "My painful truth: love would always leave me; I did not deserve to be loved. Even a donkey did not stumble over the same stone twice" (Kwok). Sylvie is full of shame, so she ends her life.

Conclusion

Ng and Kwok challenge the stereotype that since they are Chinese Americans, then they will mainly explore themes of identity, immigration, adaptation, integration, marginalization, and cultural barriers. They do refer to these issues, but they concentrate on human relationships. Lydia's and Sylvie's mothers face oppression: Marylin faces oppression as a woman who during the 1970s is not welcomed to possess a career in medicine while Ma

faces intersectional oppression because she is an Asian woman. The oppression both mothers are exposed to causes their psychological disturbance which impacts their relationship with their daughters. Their influence is more detrimental to the psychological well-being of Lydia and Sylvie than their experience of anti-Asian sentiments. Lydia and Sylvie lose their lives due to the absence of healthy relationships. The lack of mutuality in their relationships with others leads to the deterioration of their psychological well-being; their psychological growth is hindered because mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are not achieved. In other words, their relationship with their family members lacks Miller's 'five good things'. First, they do not have the energy to go on. Second, they are stuck and unable to act. Third, they are totally confused. Despite their age difference, they are both stressed by expectations of being perfect. Lydia is stressed by her parents' expectations while Sylvie is stressed by her own expectations of herself. Fourth, they feel worthless since there is no one around to support them, capable of understanding their feelings and what they are going through. They feel neglection and unable to influence their families. Last, they lose connection with others and do not have the motivation to resume these connections. They see all their efforts as futile. Lydia suffocates because of her demanding parents. She cannot fulfill their wishes which creates a sense of entrapment. The only way out is to end her life, to start all over. One step away from happiness, Sylvie discovers her beloved to be her half-brother. Thus, she believes there is no way out but to commit suicide. The sociocultural challenges these girls experience hinder their progress and creativity in resuming growth-fostering relationships. In brief, their experience as Asian Americans contributes to their condemned isolation, but it is not the main reason. If their families were there for them and addressed their needs, they would have managed to get over the obstacles and not lose their lives. Unfortunately, they are destined to experience condemned isolation which sends them straight to their death since no one recognizes their needs.

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