

Marginal Characters in the Post-Colonial Era: Mental Disorientation and Resistance of the Female Characters in *Little Fires Everywhere*

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Abstract: Celeste Ng's work *Little Fires Everywhere* has garnered many good reviews. In this novel, three oppressed women (Elena, Mia, and Bebe Chow) and two images of rebels (Mia and Izzy) were created. Based on Chandra Talpade Mohanty's postcolonial feminism and the conception of "marginal characters," this article discusses some social issues presented in *Little Fires Everywhere* such as social inequality, racial conflicts, and the difference between ideals and reality. This review focuses on the mental disorientation and resistance experienced by marginalized characters. It examines their behaviors and explores strategies for these characters to establish their identity, gain acceptance from others, and attain true equality.

Keywords: Marginal character; Mental disorientation; Resistance; Postcolonial feminism

Online publication: November 29, 2023

1. Introduction

Celeste Ng is a Chinese-American writer whose Chinese name is Wu Qishi. She was born and raised in America. However, she was also given a traditional Chinese education by her mother. Therefore, her values are influenced by both Western and Chinese cultures. In addition, her experience of living in America as an ethnic minority has given her a deeper understanding of the situation of ethnic minorities. Her masterpiece, *Little Fires Everywhere*, published in 2017, was a *New York Times* bestseller and the winner of the Ohioana Book Award.

Little Fires Everywhere is not limited to identity crisis, intense mother-daughter relationships, and racial discrimination that happen to Chinese in America. Instead, the main characters also include white and African-American females. It tells stories of a few different families. The narrative showcases conflicts between children and parents, the lower class and upper class, minority women and white women, as well as marginalized individuals and mainstream culture. These conflicts serve to underscore the theme of staying true to oneself.

This thesis is founded on the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism, as developed by the

distinguished professor of women's and gender studies, Chandra Talpade Mohanty. In her famous work *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, she pointed out that Western feminists have deprived minority women of the right to speak up for themselves. Western women hold the belief that they have been liberated. However, white women have not been truly liberated from patriarchy, and their definition of minority women is just the product of their imaginary "superior" status. Women are naturally more vulnerable when it comes to sex, which can be seen in *Little Fires Everywhere* in which Elena gives up a career promotion because of her family, and Lexie had an abortion. Both Western women and minority women are both "marginal characters" in this case. The term "marginal man" was first proposed by Georg Simmel as "Stranger" in 1908. According to him, "stranger" refers to those people who are unfamiliar with the culture and system of a specific society, thus being marginalized by the society ^[1]. The concept of "marginal character" was put forward by Parker in 1928. In Parker's view, a marginal character refers to marginalized people suffering from two kinds of different, cultures and societies. In the 1930s, Stonequith explicitly pointed out that marginalization may be resulted from immigration, education, and marriage. Marginal character is also defined as those who are different from people in American mainstream culture in terms of race, culture, gender, psychology, and so on ^[2]. Based on definitions of marginal characters, four characters are thought to be marginal characters: Elena, Mia, Izzy, and Bebe.

This thesis focuses on analyzing their marginalization, spiritual predicament, and the resistance of Mia and Izzy. These analyses are made to work out a viable way to achieve real equality and respect between male and female, white women and minority women, the upper class and the lower class, as well as different cultures.

2. Mental disorientation of female characters in *Little Fires Everywhere*

In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Elena, Mia, and Bebe represent a white female, an African American female, and a Chinese female in America, respectively. Mia and Bebe lived a poor and unstable life and suffered from a patriarchal culture, American mainstream culture, and racial discrimination as women of color. Compared with Mia and Bebe, Elena had a higher social status and enjoyed a life of comfort and privilege as a white female. But she was not as free as she thought she was. As a matter of fact, she had been fettered by Shaker Height mainstream culture throughout her life. At some point, both Mia and Elena found themselves trapped in a state of mental disorientation while grappling with confusion and oppression.

2.1. Mental disorientation of Elena

Elena was indigenous to Shaker Heights. She was taught to be practical, and obedient, and to live a well-planned life. She was born into a rich family. After she graduated from university, she and her husband Mr. Richardson had decent jobs and they lived a stable, comfortable, and wealthy life. Having gotten accustomed to such a life, she was unwilling to make any changes. She once loved Jamie and had the intention of becoming an excellent journalist reporting important news and making the world better. However, she kept these innermost thoughts deep in her heart because she regarded them as a "dangerous" fire that could destroy her present life. Although she thought that she was free to make decisions and firmly believed that she had made the right decision, she was actually deprived of the freedom to do what she really wanted. She refused her love Jamie and married Mr. Richardson just because she thought Mr. Richardson was more "suitable" to start a stable and wealthy life with. She gave up a job promotion to be a good mother. She cared for her children much more compared to her husband, so that he could devote himself to his career. She managed to balance work and family and be a good "modern woman" according to her mother's ideals. She did everything that was thought to be "right" by others in a patriarchal society in which women are required to have decent jobs in addition to

taking good care of the family. “A lifetime of practical and comfortable considerations settled atop the spark inside her like a thick, heavy blanket ^[3].”

Elena was afraid of living a life full of uncertainty and instability. When antiwar protests broke out, she did not join them because she worried about accommodation, her security, her successful graduation, and so on. The birth of her daughter, Izzy, brought a challenging period into her life, as Izzy had to be hospitalized due to her weakness. Even though Izzy eventually grew into a healthy girl, her mother was frequently overwhelmed by fear and anxiety whenever she saw her. She became quite resistant to making or accepting any changes, let alone undertaking anything drastic ^[4]. When Izzy did something against the so-called rules, she did not try to understand or listen to Izzy. Instead, she tried to correct Izzy’s behavior through punishments. Besides, Mrs. Richardson was also jealous of Mia when she saw that Izzy treated Mia as if she was her mother. Elena hated Mia, not only because Mia broke her rules and made changes in her life, but also because Mia’s freewheeling lifestyle reminded her of her innermost “fire.” She was desperate to drive Mia away because she was afraid to face up to the “dangerous” spark in her heart and was unwilling to admit that she might have made the wrong decision.

In short, despite Mrs. Richardson being wealthy and well-educated, she is defined as a victim of Shaker Heights culture and a marginal character in the background of patriarchal society.

2.2. Mental disorientation of Mia

Mia was born in a conservative middle-class family. Mia had devoted herself to photography since she was 11 years old. However, her dream of being an excellent photographer had never been approved or supported by her parents. Her brother loved her, but he was not interested in photography. Her neighbor Mr. Wilkinson taught her some photography skills, but he moved away and lost contact with Mia. Her mentor Pauline admired her, but she died of a brain disease not long after Mia dropped out of school. Therefore, Mia was always lonely in the pursuit of her dreams. Her mental disorientation was mainly caused by her family members, firstly by the lack of love, understanding, and support, and their deep-rooted concept of practicality, secondly by her younger brother Warren’s accidental death, and thirdly by the birth of her daughter, Pearl.

Mr. Wright was a handyman and Mrs. Wright was a nurse. They worked for long hours to support their family. They were both disciples of “practicality.” They took pride in Warren’s talent in sports, whereas they did not understand Mia’s dream and belittled it as time-wasting, money-consuming, and unpractical. They never gave Mia any financial or mental support in her pursuit of her dreams, regardless of her extreme enthusiasm and outstanding talent in photography. They even tried to stop Mia from going to the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University by not paying for her college tuition.

Their indifference was a significant factor that influenced Mia’s decision to become a surrogate mother. When her scholarship was canceled and there was no way to raise the salary of her part-time job, she was so afraid of being forced to drop out of school that she agreed to be a surrogate mother for the Ryans. She knew it was cruel to make her baby a deal, but she needed money. Her brother was upset with her behavior. Nobody understood her, nobody helped her, nobody accompanied her. She suffered from morning sickness, gossip, guilt, and self-blame. Then she snapped when her dearest brother Warren died. She desperately needed comfort and support from her parents, but they disappointed her again. They were ashamed of Mia’s surrogacy and refused to let her attend Warren’s funeral. After giving birth to Pearl, Mia had difficulties dealing with her. She was so perplexed that she wondered whether to give Pearl to the Ryans. Due to the guilt she carried for the Ryans, her younger brother’s death, her parents’ indifference, and the birth of Pearl, Mia experienced a period of profound confusion.

2.3. Mental disorientation of Bebe

Bebe Chow was a young Chinese woman who had been living in America for two years. She gave up a well-paying job in San Francisco and followed her boyfriend to Cleveland, but ended up being abandoned after she told him she was pregnant. Struggling with her limited English-speaking skills, unfamiliarity with local salvage services, overwork, low pay, and the absence of family or friends, she was overwhelmed by despair and depression. Her sense of hopelessness and helplessness grew to the point where she made the heartbreaking decision to leave her baby in front of a fire station. After her life returned to normal, she was eager to reunite with her daughter. With the help of Mia, news media, and a Chinese-American lawyer named Ed Lim, she started the fight for the custody of her daughter against the McCulloughs who were getting ready to adopt her daughter May Ling. This fight between the upper class and the common class ended in favor of the McCulloughs.

Bebe Chow was a representative of a poorly-educated Chinese woman in America suffering from traditional patriarchy, social inequality, as well as racial discrimination. She was considered “the other” in a patriarchal society and the “silent” in American culture^[5]. Bebe betted her life and happiness on her boyfriend, which implied her dependence on a man. In a patriarchal society, women are much more vulnerable when it comes to sex. During Bebe’s pregnancy and while she was breastfeeding, her boyfriend abandoned his responsibilities and disappeared, leaving her to endure great pain and discomfort on her own. In Cleveland, her identity was not recognized, and she was isolated from the culture of Shaker Heights. She was discriminated against and was part of the disadvantaged group of women of color. Western females regard themselves as “educated, modern, having control over their bodies and sexualities, free to make their own decisions,” while they consider women of color as “sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, and victimized”^[6]. They have a sense of superiority over minority women, just as Elena and Mrs. McCullough treated Bebe Chow with a condescending attitude in *Little Fires Everywhere*. All of these factors contributed to Bebe’s mental disorientation.

3. Resistance of the female characters in *Little Fires Everywhere*

In this novel, Celeste Ng created two rebellious female figures: Mia and Izzy. They were courageous and independent enough to break the rules and live the life they wanted^[7]. They were not educated to be what their parents or mainstream culture required them to be. Instead, they had explicit values of their own. They never compromised with oppression, unequal treatment, and misunderstanding. Instead, they resisted prejudice and inequality, embarking firmly on a journey of self-discovery, self-development, and self-construction.

3.1. The self-awareness and resistance of Mia

Mia was a powerful woman who never gave up easily. Having been accustomed to dealing with everything without relying on men, she never thought about getting married. She did not give up on her dream or her daughter despite carrying a great financial burden. Terrible hardships and misfortunes such as her cars breaking down and her wallets being stolen did not tear her down. Instead, they made her stronger. In addition to their great achievements in photography, she brought her daughter up to be a smart, polite, competent, and creative girl.

Different from Elena, Mia behaved as she pleased. Mia’s vagrant and unstable lifestyle was not approved by Mrs. Richardson. However, Mrs. Richardson’s opinion of her and advice for her did not matter at all because she was a determined woman who clearly knew what she wanted. After being treated unfairly by Mrs. Richardson, she took a mild reprisal by leaving some photos disclosing the inner secrets of the Richardsons and then moved away.

Mia was a kind and warm-hearted person who treated people of different races equally. In contrast, Elena helped others out by patronizing charity and mercy, seeing herself as superior to them. Though discriminated against by Mrs. Richardson, Mia was always friendly to Elena's children. She listened to Izzy patiently; she helped keep Lexie's secret of abortion and looked after her carefully. Despite Bebe's limited English, Mia patiently listened to her and provided suggestions on how to regain custody of May Ling. Mia's personality served as an unspoken form of resistance against racial discrimination, as she earned the respect and trust of individuals from diverse backgrounds.

In short, Mia was an independent woman who never gave up, a vagrant artist against mainstream culture, and a charismatic person breaking racial discrimination by pure kindness. She had always been on the way to resisting misunderstanding, discrimination, and unequal treatment.

3.2. Izzy: The rebellious fire in Shaker Heights

Born in a white elite family, Izzy was not close to her family members because she was different from others in Shaker Heights. She was a girl with a rebellious spirit, inclined to break the rules and regulations. She never succumbed to unfair treatment.

Izzy realized the ideological ossification of Shaker Heights residents at a very young age. However, nobody understood her. She was viewed as a freak by most people, which made her a marginal character in Shaker Heights. As a 14-year-old girl, her voice was too small to be heard in mainstream culture. She did not know what to be until Mia came. Mia attentively listened to Bebe, offering her companionship and understanding, which boosted Bebe's confidence. Realizing that she and Mia shared a common bond, Bebe made a bold decision to leave her family's grand house and embarked on a determined journey in search of Mia.

Izzy was not a "black sheep" as most Shaker residents regarded. As a matter of fact, she was a kind-hearted and just girl with a grateful heart. Like Mia, she did not discriminate against others. When she was laughed at by her classmates, the black girl Deja never joined in the snide comments. When her schoolbag was not well closed, Deja helped her zip it. When she forgot to take a tampon, Deja discreetly gave one to her. Izzy remembered Deja's kindness with gratitude. Therefore, when she saw their orchestra teacher Mrs. Peters treat Deja rudely and humiliate her bitterly, she broke her bow and threw the pieces in her face, then blocked all the doors of the school with toothpicks. After finding out about her mother's unfair treatment towards Mia and Pearl, the little spark in her heart became prairie fire. She was determined to burn the rules and regulations down. In the end, she made up her mind to live a free life together with Mia.

Izzy's rebellious spirit is presented by her constant resistance against discrimination and inequality. As a representative of a new generation of white women, she brings hope and possibility to improve the current situation of racial discrimination and class inequality.

4. Conclusion

Marginal characters in *Little Fire Everywhere* are not limited to Chinese Americans. Instead, the scope expands to white women like Elena and Izzy, African American women like Mia, and Chinese women like Bebe Chow. This novel's theme transcends cultural and national boundaries, making it of universal significance. Through an examination of the marginalized female characters in *Little Fires Everywhere* and a study of postcolonialism, several implications have emerged.

Firstly, white women often perceive themselves as superior to minority women, leading to unequal and unfair treatment. To foster friendly relationships between white and minority women, it is essential for white women to approach these interactions with respect and genuine assistance, rather than a sense of superiority.

Additionally, both white and minority women experience oppression under patriarchal cultural norms. Women have the right to lead lives true to their desires, emphasizing the importance of following one's heart and self-construction. Lastly, the importance of respecting different cultures and lifestyles cannot be overstated in creating a more harmonious and diverse cultural environment. Elena chose to conform to mainstream culture, while Mia remained committed to being her authentic self, regardless of societal norms. There is no inherent right or wrong between mainstream and non-mainstream cultures, stable and transient lives; what truly matters is mutual respect and understanding.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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