



RESEARCH PAPER

Exploring the Racial Discrimination against Chinese American Immigrants: Analysis of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* in the Backdrop of Critical Race Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article aims at the exploration of the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng as a reproduction of the racial discrimination and marginalization experienced by a Chinese immigrant woman, Bebe Chow who is unable to get the custody of her biological daughter May Ling Chow from a White American family of McCulloughs through a legal battle. Drawing insight from the certain concepts of Critical Race Theory inferred from the work of Delgado and Stefancic, the study ascertains that Bebe Chow offers a strong resistance against the injustice by kidnapping her daughter and leaving America for China. The findings of this study reveal that the Asian immigrants in America often face various oppressions embedded in the societal structure and legal system due to their marginalized status in the society. The study also encourages the immigrant women to offer resistance against their persecution on the basis of colour and race.

Keywords: Custody, Discrimination, Immigrant, *Little Fires Everywhere*, Race

Introduction

Chinese American female writers have produced a considerably rich literature which has received a great recognition in the recent years despite of their marginalization in the main stream literature. These female writers have portrayed the lives of the immigrant women by addressing the racial injustice as well as the biased attitude and misunderstanding in the various matters regarding immigrants on the part of white dominated people. Similarly, they have depicted the issues of the bicultural adherence in connection with the immigrants along with the other challenges of the host society. These female writers have shown that despite the numerous challenges, the voices of the immigrant women are not silenced by the white dominated culture. Among these female writers, the literary work of Celeste Ng has become famous due its depiction of the lives of the immigrant women and the various challenges with respect to the racial discrimination in the host society. It is important to point out that the works of Ng usually employs the universal themes of the complications of parent-children relationship, race, gender and class in social interactions. She explores the complexities of the cultural identity as well as the challenges faced by immigrant families in a multicultural societal structure. While, this article is aimed at the investigation of *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng in terms of the dynamics of racial discrimination faced by the immigrants in the American society with a particular focus on the female character, Bebe Chow in her legal fight to gain the custody of her daughter May ling Chow. In this regard, the selected novel of this study has been analyzed in the light of the notions of the Critical Race Theory derived from the work of Delgado and Stefancic.

Literature Review

While, reviewing the related literature on the researches already conducted on the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng, it is pertinent to mention that Smith (2020) points out that the legal battle for the custody of child is a primary catalyst for the title of this novel. The novel as a whole acts as the site of exploration of the problematic systems. The issues of class, race and motherhood are highlighted in this novel. As the “enduring interest in these provocative, deeply personal themes combined with the empathetic and engaging way Ng explores these ideas helped make *Little Fires Everywhere* a national and international success (Smith,2020,p.5).In this regard, white maternity appears as a state apparatus which can be investigated from the various perspectives. The oppressive system does not change and results in inevitability of tragic ends. As Mia and Bebe are unable to cope with the ruling ideologies and they have to leave the suburb for their safety. Similarly, Bebe is forced break the law to get the custody of her child.

Similarly, Lombardi (2021) in the book review of the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng points out that the key point of this novel is the alluring writing of the novelist as well as the analysis of upper middle-class lifestyles. The story of the novel is interesting to all readers with its easy wording story, interesting themes and in depth characters. Further, it has been pointed out that “this novel is equal parts drama and a heartfelt story; it is about family, friends, loss, and love” (Lombardi, 2021, p.104).In this way, certain literary aspects make this novel attractive for the common readers as well.

While, Tian (2021) explores the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng from the perspectives of The Self- Differentiation Theory. This theory was originated in the field of family therapy and counseling. It holds the view that the members of a family influence each other. It also points out the fact that in case of investigation of the abnormality of a person, the family of that person must be taken into consideration as the family background and other family members greatly influence the life of the individual. The researcher points out that *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng deals with the issue of disengagement as they considerably function separately and the sense of loyalty and coordination is missing from them. As it is evident that “in the Richardson household, both children and parents are independent from each other. There is lack of attachment and bonding between family members, especially with Izzy” (Tian, 2021, p.294). They have considerable personal autonomy and a lack of sense of unity of the family.

On the other hand, Li Huina (2022) explores the novel *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng in terms of motherhood. The researcher points out that “Celeste Ng breaks the aesthetic expectation of the traditional patriarchal culture on maternal love, removes the additional patriarchal cultural meaning on mothers, and meanwhile, returns the original appearance of maternal love in its true nature”(p.20).In this regard, the researchers considers Mia as a true example of maternity. She urges the women to pursue their cherish dreams in addition to their responsibilities as the mothers. She builds a strong relationship with her daughter in which both the mother and daughter support each other for the development of each other.

Resultantly, the research studies already conducted on *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng are mostly associated with the various cultural and social aspects while this research is mainly focused on the exploration of discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity of a Chinese American woman Bebe Chow and her marginalization during a trial in the court for the custody of her daughter May Ling Chow. In this regard, the painful experiences of Bebe Chow reveal the certain discriminatory aspects embedded in the legal and social system of America as well.

Theoretical Framework

This research article seeks to investigate the novel *A Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng published in 2017 in the light of Critical Race Theory. While, Critical Race theory is an intellectual and social movement that is based on the premise that race is a socially established and culturally devised characteristic of a physically distinct subgroup of human beings. This is not natural or biologically apprehensive component of human beings. It is mainly utilized to exploit and oppress the people of colour.

While, Delgado and Stefancic in their book *Critical Race Theory An Introduction* published in 2017, have given a detailed description of the various important aspects of Critical Race Theory that may be utilized as the lens for the exploration of racial discrimination in the literary works. The first important aspect in this regard is social construction which implies to the fact that the social relations and thoughts play a vital role in shaping the concepts of the race. They have “no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 21). It is a reality that the people with a common ethnicity share certain colour of skin and physical texture. But these characteristics “have little or nothing to do with distinctly human, higher-order traits, such as personality, intelligence, and moral behavior” (p.21). On the other hand, “society frequently chooses to ignore these scientific truths, creates races, and endows them with pseudo-permanent characteristics is of great interest to critical race theory” (p.21). All these aspects play a vital role in the construction of a network of racism. The second important aspect with respect to racism is a material determinism which plays a significant role in strengthening the racial oppression in the society. “Because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (p.21). The aspect of material comfort is also involved in the construction of racism in the society. The third important aspect is the voice of colour which implies to the fact that “because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know” (p.22). In this way, these writers of colours give voice to their feelings about race and various forms of racial oppression. For this purpose, “The “legal storytelling” movement urges black and brown writers to recount their experiences with racism and the legal system and to apply their own unique perspectives to assess law’s master narratives” (p.22). In this way, the voice of colour is important for the exploration of racial discrimination in the society. Similarly, the fourth important factor in this regard is structural determinism. This points out the fact that the structure of the society provides certain reasons as well as it “is ill equipped to redress certain types of wrongs. Structural determinism, a powerful notion that engages both the idealistic and the materialistic strands of critical race theory, takes a number of forms” (p.34). All these aspects are helpful to investigate the transformative and liberating experiences of the people of colour by probing the multiple cultural contexts that are involved in shaping their identity in the society as well.

Results and Discussion

Starting from the analysis of *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng, it is important to point out that the novel reveals the story about the two women, the mother Mia, an artist and her daughter Pearl, who are living in a rented house of Mrs. Richardson. The interaction of the both the families help to understand the various characters of the novel. Then, a controversy arises in the town over an abandoned baby girl, May Ling Chow by the co-worker of Mia Warren, Bebe Chow. While, Bebe Chow is an immigrant of Chinese origin in the host America society. As a result of postpartum depression, Bebe Chow had left her daughter near the firehouse. The baby had the Chinese facial texture and the issueless family of McCulloughs decided to adopt her. They named the baby Mirabelle. When, the mother of the child, Bebe Chow gets in touch with the family of McCulloughs, there starts a legal battle

between them for the custody of the child. The people in the town have the divided opinions over the custody issue. Some people think that the baby should be handed over to her real mother while the other consider the new parents as the better choice for the baby on account of their financial stability. Mrs Richardson is also in favour of McCulloughs whereas Mia is in favour of Bebe Chow. Meanwhile, Mrs Richardson investigates about Mia Warren and it is revealed that she is the surrogate mother of her daughter Pearl. While, feeling the suspicions about herself, Mia leaves the house with her daughter Pearl. Meanwhile, the legal battle for the custody of the child is intensified between Bebe Chow and McCulloughs.

While, probing the selected text from the perspectives of Critical Race Theory, it appears that the social construction plays an important role in shaping the notions about race in the society. The communication between the various members of the family of Richardson fully reveals this fact as they point out; "Thank god we live in Shaker," Lexie said one day during a provocative episode entitled "Stop Bringing White Girls Home to Dinner!" "I mean, we're lucky. No one sees race here." "Everyone sees race, Lex," said Moody". (Ng 2017, p.41). The immigrants, especially the people of colour have the marginalized status in the American society although some people deny this fact but the novelist seems to be well aware of it and she portrays it as well.

From this stand point, Dyer (2001) is of the view that racial imagery plays a vital role in the structure of the modern world. The cost of exports of the countries and regions, the voices of the people listened at the international gatherings as well as "who bombs and who is bombed, who gets what jobs, housing, access to health care and education, what cultural activities are subsidized and sold, in what terms they are validated – these are all largely inextricable from racial imagery" (Dyer, 2001, p.540). In this regard, the racial judgments about the people how they look like, their capacities, where they reside, pave the way for the decisions about the minute practices and lives of the people. It is evident that race is not the only factor that is decisive in all these matters as the people with wise judgmental abilities always strive to remove all these types of prejudices and hurdles. In this regard, some intrinsically geographical features and physical characteristics between the people are also involved in these matters.

Correspondingly, the aspects of material determinism is also vivid in the story when Ng mentions the point of view of white people as "The McCulloughs were rescuing Mirabelle, their supporters insisted. They were giving an unwanted child a better life. They were heroes, breaking down racism through cross-cultural adoption" (Ng, 2017, p.128). Through this manipulation, the real mother is being denied the custody of her biological daughter. It appears from the text that along with the social construction, the material determinism is in favor of the McCulloughs and Bebe Chow is also considered as a foreign subject and resultantly becomes the victim of racism as well. All of her identity markers including race, class and ethnicity as well as the poor economic condition are considered as a threat to the existing system and she is perceived as an undeserving mother. While, on the other hand, Mrs. McCullough as a white rich woman is viewed as a true maternal figure for the baby even though she is not the real mother of the baby. The material comforts of the family of Mrs. McCullough carry the weight even during the trial in the court for the custody of the child as well. Not only the law but the common people of the locality are also advocating the custody of the child in the control of the adoptive parents. Another state apparatus media is also involved in this propaganda and contributes in favour of the dominant version. As the story reveals; "I think it's wonderful, what they're doing," one woman told reporters during an on-the-street segment. (Ng, 2017, p.128). The higher socioeconomic status, the state sponsored position of the family of McCulloughs are prioritized by the state officers. The fact that May Ling is Bebe's biological child holds no influence. During the first attempt of Bebe to reclaim her child, Mr. McCullough said that she "has no right to be here, (Ng, 2017, p.107)". It was really a racist as well as the anti-immigrant statement. Then, the elements of structural determinism of the society is also involved here when Bebe Chow is discriminated and marginalized even with the involvement of the police and courts as well.

Another aspect is that Bebe Chow is a poor woman and she is unable afford a lawyer to fight a case of her visitation rights during the custody trial. This seems a systematic attack on the rights of women and even the children of colour as well. Similarly, the voice of the colour is also prominent in these remarks;

“To pretend that this baby is just a baby—to pretend like there’s no race issue here—is disingenuous,” Dr. Wong had snapped, while Serena fidgeted at the edge of the shot. “And no, I’m not ‘playing the race card.’ Ask yourself: would we be having such a heated discussion if this baby were blond?”(Ng, 2017, p.129).

In addition, the writer seems to present a serious criticism on the white upper class of American society by presenting the voice of colour in connection with the Asian American society. The story of the novel reveals that White are the privileged class in the American society and the text reveals the racial bias in the story through the interaction of certain characters. In fact, the novel explores the two classes as the White of American society and the families of the people of Asian origin.

While, Rattansi (2007) is of the view that tracing the history of whiteness in the US it appears that during the period of 1840s to the 1940s, “colour and racial categorization have a fluidity and instability very much at odds with the conceptions of strict and obvious biological difference implied by the notion of race” (Rattansi, 2007, p.42).It is important to mention that the term coloured developed to mention all the people other than White in the society. Later on, the term coloured appeared as a racial norm outside America but in the other parts of the world as well. The white people have a considerable undeclared superiority and domination over the other races. In America, the rights of Black citizens have been manipulated and even overlooked for centuries by the white people as a result of racism embedded in the system. In the story of the novel of this study, the childless couple of McCuloughs can provide her adopted child May ling Chow the necessities of the life but they are also depriving her from her own cultural norms and birth values. Similarly, they know that Bebe Chow is unable to resist the injustice against her in the American society.

On the other hand, Zhou (2009) is of the view that the first generation of immigrants is not usually expressive about the procedure of adjustment and assimilation in their host land but they wish their considerable recognition in the society. “More specifically, they want to hold jobs that pay well, own homes, raise children to be educated and occupationally successful, and have financially secure retirements” (Zhou, 2009, p.223).In the same way, the unskilled and poor immigrants which form “a sizable proportion of contemporary Chinese immigration, have few choices but to take low-wage jobs and settle in inner-city Chinatowns, starting their American lives in poverty” (p.224). Their maximum goal in the life is to achieve the status of the Average Americans in their lives. While, social mobility among the Chinese American is due to the socioeconomic issues. They start from the bottom and move up through the hard work. In this regard, issues and challenges concerning their citizenship, civil rights as well as political incorporation in the host American society also emerge as well.

While, it seems that Celeste Ng gives voice to the feelings of the Brown people of Asian American in this work who are struggling in a world that is fueled by the privileges of White as well as the capitalism. In the end of the story, the struggling artist Mia and Bebe Chow, an oppressed Asian are forced to leave the Shaker Heights. Similarly, Bebe Chow loses case of the custody of her daughter May Ling Chow in the court from McCuloughs. Resultantly, she picks the baby from the house of McCuloughs during the midnight and the next day she leaves the locality of Shaker Height and US to China for good. Her daughter May Ling Chow showed the familiarity during all this and did not make any sound that might have created troubles for her mother. This incident shows that Bebe Chow was unable to tackle the racial obstructions in gaining the right to take even her real daughter and she was forced to breach those shackle by going against it and taking her baby to her ancestral land

as well. While, certain comments of white people even justify the custody of the girl by McCuloughs, when it is said that “She’ll be raised in a home that truly doesn’t see race” (Ng, 2017, p.222). Although, this comments denies the racial aspects but the inward actions against the legal rights of the Bebe Chow as a biological mother of the May Ling are mainly due to her marginalized status in the society. While, Bebe Chow might have treated differently if she were the white woman of the society. In this way, the aspect of structural determinism is vivid and embedded in the society in such a way that it always propagates the dominant view of the white people of the society.

While, Allport (2013) is of the view that despite the prevailing notion that Asian Americans are no longer facing racial discrimination in America, the various racial stereotypes constantly inform about the societal views of Asian American. In this regard, the first idea is that “Asian Americans are seen as submissive: culturally prone to be physically unaggressive, politically docile, and accommodating” (Allport, 2013, p.164). It is important to note that this stereotype usually arises with the fact that Asian Americans considerably possess different physiological features in terms of height and weight than the people of other racial groups in the American society. Then, “it stems from Western interpretations of certain Asian cultural and aesthetic values. In addition, Asian immigrants’ desires to avoid calling attention to themselves, to survive silently, and to remain invisible further encourage the perception of submissiveness” (p.164). This is mainly due to the fact that Asian Americans mainly place a great emphasis on family connections and relations as the main source of their identification. The loyalty to the extended family is usually expected from everyone attached to it and the harmony of the family is highly prioritized.

While, Omi and Winant (2015) are of the view that the movements based on racial concerned started during 1950s with a particular focus on the social meanings of race. “It was this battle that transformed racial awareness, racial politics, and racial identity. Race is not only a matter of politics, economics, or culture, but of all these “levels” of lived experience simultaneously” (Omi and Winant, 2015, p.162). In other words, it is a distinguished phenomenon which is imbued in each individual identity, community, family as well as in the market based relationship and in the state institutions as well. These movements for racial justice in the post-World War II were initially focused on their concerns from the political, social and even to norms and traditions of the daily lives of the oppressed community. The working class of the people of Chinese American suffered prejudice and discrimination on a wider scale from the oppression of white people. The politicians and labour leaders used coolies and the other low paid Chinese American workers as the scapegoats. Although, in the recent times, most of the people in the United States have perceived China as the rising economic power of the world but the racial discrimination against the Chinese Americans is still on the rise.

Additionally, with respect to the Asian American people, the notion of model minority was spread in an effort to exhibit the fundamental equality of the American society in terms of equal opportunities for the citizens. In this regard, Moses et al.(2018) point out that Asian Americans are depicted as the “heroic figures in a morality play that was mainly focused on ultimately less about praising them than about vilifying African Americans for their supposed failures and ensuring that the status quo that benefited whites would remain undisturbed” (Moses et al.,2018, p.19). It is interesting to point out that Asian Americans are depicted as the models of abolishing the racism and the victims of unfair discrimination as well. “What remains constant is that in both instances, Asian Americans are deployed as pawns in a struggle to maintain white supremacy” (Moses et al., 2018, p.19). This implies to the fact Asian Americans are perceived as having the tendency to assimilate into the host American society better than the other minority groups. These tactics are utilized just as a tool to maintain the supremacy of the White people in the society. While, in connection with story of the novel of this study, the aspect of the structural determinism is also inherently involved in these comments when the novelist points out, “You can tell that when she looks down at that baby in her arms, she doesn’t see a Chinese baby. All she sees is a baby, plain

and simple” (Ng, 2017, p.128). It is evident that a baby girl is stripped off from her own mother and culture and this act of discrimination is being justified through the certain consolation remarks by the people of dominant views.

While, it is important to point out that the international treaty The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the General Assembly of United Nations Organization in 1979 “obliges states parties to eliminate discrimination and to guarantee the equal enjoyment of human rights, including civil and political, and economic, social and cultural rights. The Convention contains various references to aspects of the right to social security.”(Goldblatt, 2016, p.59).It urges the countries to eliminate the discrimination against women and girls and empower them to achieve gender equality in the society as well. But discrimination on the basis of race still exists in many societies of the world as well.

While, the whole discussion with respect to the character of Bebe Chow reveals that racism is America’s central political fault line and it influences the American legal system as well. Bebe Chow even as the biological mother of the child is unable to get any relief or custody of her daughter May ling from the court. The decision of the court is in favour of her opponent. Resultantly, she decides to kidnap the child from the house of McCuloughs and sets off towards her land of origin, China. She is ultimately succeeded in her efforts. Although, McCuloughs try to follow her but they are unable to stop her and get the baby. As a member of the oppressed and marginalized group in the American society, that was the only option of resistance available for her towards the injustice and discrimination.

Conclusion

The study significantly reveals the racial discrimination and marginalization of Bebe Chow, an immigrant woman of Chinese origin during her legal struggle to gain the custody of her biological daughter May Ling from the White family of McCuloughs. The study also points out that the certain racial biased elements are still embedded in the social and legal system of America that are focused to strengthen the views and benefits of White people. The findings of this article also reveal that as an immigrant woman, Bebe is unable to gain the custody of her daughter, May Ling. Resultantly, she is compelled to take a bold step against the oppression and injustice. She kidnaps the baby from the house of her legal opponent and leaves American to her ancestral land China. Similarly, the study reveals that the legal system and state oppressive apparatus are involved in the exploitation of immigrant and ultimately, Bebe Chow offers her possible resistance against all these injustices. The study also encourages the immigrant women to realize their true worth and they must not succumb to the discrimination and marginalization and organize themselves for a strong resistance against the persecution on the basis of colour and race. Similarly, this research also furnishes a sense of realization to the host American White dominated society to understand the certain discriminatory elements embedded in the legal and social system that are propagated to ensure the benefits of white people of American society. The removal of these grievances of Black and coloured people may lead to the establishment of a better social and legal system. This study can be extended in a sense to investigate the social and economic factors in connection with the depression of Bebe Chow in her legal struggle as an immigrant woman to gain the custody of her daughter May Ling Chow.

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