



The Analysis of Identity Construction in *Little Fires Everywhere* under the perspective of Diverse Masculinity

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Abstract: This paper employs Cornell's theory of masculinity to analyze the identity construction of four male characters in Celeste Ng's novel *Little Fires Everywhere* and explore the complex interweaving of diverse masculinities within class, gender, and racial structures. Bill consolidates his elite lawyer identity through conspiratorial strategies. Trip's performative hegemony fails to conceal his fragile essence. Moody engages in intellectual resistance with subordinate masculinity but remains constructed by class limitations. Brian attempts to construct a marginalized African American elite identity within systemic oppression. Through differentiated masculinity practices, the four males collectively outline the hierarchical identity genealogy under patriarchy. It not only explains that masculinity is a fluid identity resource, but also provides an intersectional analysis based on masculinity for gender studies within Chinese American literature.

Keywords: Little Fires Everywhere, Masculinity, Identity Construction,

Celeste Ng and *Little Fires Everywhere*

The debut novel of Chinese-American author Celeste Ng, *Everything I Never Told You*, caused a huge sensation when it was published in 2014. Three years later, she released her second masterpiece, *Little Fires Everywhere*. Upon publication, it garnered significant acclaim, winning Amazon's Book of the Year and 27 other literary awards.

Little Fires Everywhere focuses on a group of women and explores various social issues such as family education, racial conflicts, abortion and abandonment, surrogacy and adoption, ideals and reality, highlighting the spiritual crisis beneath the facade of American prosperity. Both domestic and international researches on this novel primarily center on female characters. Domestic studies mainly concentrate on the deconstruction and reconstruction of female subjectivity, ethical choices, intergenerational trauma, power, and alienation. International research primarily analyzes *Little Fires Everywhere* from perspectives such as race, class, narrative strategies, and motherhood. However, in Celeste Ng's portrayal, male characters in the novel also shine brightly, driving the plot forward. And their distinct characteristics and identity construction also are worth of being explored. This paper follows the core theme of "identity construction," and employs Cornell's theory of masculinity to analyze the masculine traits exhibited by Bill, Trip, Moody, and Brian. It delves into how these characters construct their identities under the influence of masculinity.

Raewyn Connell's Theory of Masculinity

Masculinity, also known as male traits or manliness, has been studied since the early 20th century within the framework of gender role theories. According to R.W. Connell and James Messerschmidt, it is not until the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" is proposed that truly sociological studies of masculinity begin to emerge. [1] Sociologist Raewyn Connell is a significant scholar in the field of masculinity theory. She integrates patriarchy with masculinity studies and, in her book *Gender and Power*, she articulates a tripartite relationship within the social gender order under patriarchal structures. [2] She emphasizes that masculinity is constructed through practice. Since the 1980s, Connell's work on masculinity has elevated it to an equal status with feminist research. In her book *Masculinities*, Connell categorizes masculinity into four types: hegemony, subordination, complicity, and marginalization. Among these four types of masculinities described by Connell, hegemony and subordination represent the two extremes, while complicity and marginalization occupy intermediate positions between them. [3] Men are not dominated by a single type of masculinity but often exhibit multiple forms in practice.

Strategies for Identity Construction on the Masculinity Spectrum

The Conspirator Bill: The Invisible Guardian of The Middle-class Authority

In social life, few men can truly achieve hegemonic masculinity, yet they still benefit from it. Masculinities constructed in ways that patriarchal dividend, without the tensions or risks of being the front line troops of patriarchy, are complicit in this sense. [4] In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Bill Richardson's identity construction exemplifies the complex interweaving of complicit masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. The labels "father of the Richardson family," "white lawyer," and "representative of the elite class" heavily rely on collusion with the existing order. Meanwhile Bill's masculinity also upholds hierarchy and patriarchy. However, he does not directly practice hegemonic standards to dominate others but rather hides behind his rational and assertive wife. He attempts to use a mildly compromising attitude to mask his essential beneficiary status.



As a father, Bill ostensibly delegates all decision-making power on household matters to Elena, but in reality, he shifts the burden of emotional labor and disciplinary responsibilities onto women. This makes himself to focus entirely on his career. After the premature birth of their youngest daughter, Izzy, it is Mrs. Richardson who spends her days anxiously holding her baby. During this time Bill always works for long hours, leaving Mrs. Richardson to face anxiety and fear alone. His lack of involvement in family affairs indirectly exacerbates the deterioration of the mother-daughter relationship but further reinforces his image as an authoritative father. When the family atmosphere becomes tense due to the Mirabelle case, Bill's patriarchal authority faces resistance. His first instinct is to look at his wife Elena's reaction. Indeed, Elena immediately stands up to defend Bill and urges Izzy to apologize to her father. The relationship between Elena and her daughter Izzy has always been contentious. This fact is known by everyone in the family. But Bill does not confront Izzy's disrespectful behavior directly, instead delegates parental duties to his wife. This approach effectively avoids direct conflict with his daughter and indirectly maintains his patriarchal status through Elena. In family education, Bill is often absent. This rational detachment is essentially complicit in patriarchy. Even though there is no visible presence of Bill within the home environment, a sense of oppression envelops from all directions—a feeling akin to “a mountain range on the horizon.” [5] He need not directly enforce domestic hegemony but can benefit through milder means. This represents a low-cost strategy for maintaining privileged status under complicit masculinity.

In the history of human civilization, males have controlled the power of writing for a considerable period, and their "elite" members possesses the ability to define and represent themselves. [6] As a white elite lawyer, his profession demands "objectivity and composure," which is constructed as an ideal trait of hegemonic masculinity, especially in the custody battle over Mirabelle. He believes that his wife Elena's views are too absolute, influenced by personal emotions and biases, whereas he remains more rational and objective. Bill ultimately wins custody of Mirabelle for the McCullough family under the guise of legal logic, effectively upholding the order of white middle-class society. This fully exposes the complicit relationship between hegemonic masculinity and race, class, and power. Bill is not a traditional "dominant" male. Through mild attitudes such as rationality and neutrality, he conceals class and gender oppression, thereby more thoroughly maintaining male hegemony and reinforcing his identity as a white elite from deep within.

The Performer Trip: Identity Anxiety Under Hegemonic Masculinity

Cornell defines hegemonic masculinity in *Masculinities* as "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees(or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." [4]. As the eldest son of the Richardson family, Trip's athletic achievements and masculine charm initially meet the white middle-class expectations for an ideal masculine identity. However, this is fundamentally an imitation of hegemonic standards and a performative construction of the "popular male" identity. When those who are oppressed escape or resist, hegemonic masculinity reveals its fragility.

Masculinity is considered as a "performance" of men rather than an inherent attribute they possess. [7] Trip, tall and slender with brown skin, excels in sports such as rugby, basketball, and soccer, displaying significant masculine appeal through his athletic prowess. This places him on the top of the campus hierarchy, aligning with Cornell's thought that male dominance is established through physical ability. His sport abilities also symbolize hegemonic masculinity. He has inherited his father's invisible patriarchal authority. His speech and actions serve for his white middle-class identity. In the novel, Trip remains a confident and sunny athlete who cares little about matters not directly affecting him. He takes the superior material life provided by his family for granted, thus reinforcing the life pattern of white middle-class males. During family conflicts, he always maintains an observer, refusing to participate in emotional regulation. He inherits Bill's "non-interference" attitude from his father, which similarly shifts the responsibility of emotion adjustment to women, perpetuating gender roles under patriarchy. Hormone-laden Trip is very popular among girls. Moody mocks him about needing contraception: "Otherwise there are going to the dozens of girls running around with baby Trips." [5] However, Trip doesn't care and counters by pointing out that no girl wants to sleep with Moody. At a deeper level, Trip satisfies heteronormative conquest through countless sexual relationships, making women tools for reinforcing his own masculinity. He refers to Pearl as a "nerd," feeling that she resembles a mousy little thing—cute but lacking feminine charm. To Trip, Pearl is more like a prey to be captured. He associates the horizontal, vertical, and curved lines she draws while handling math problems with her "lips, hips, and other curves " [5] This description is filled with sexual fantasies and male's gaze. However, hegemony does not mean total control. It is not automatic, and may be disrupted - or even disrupt itself. [4]. Trip always fears why does Pearl take an interest in him? He fears that one day she will realize her mistake and no longer likes him. In his mother Elena's view, he likes superficial yet beautiful and outgoing girls, just a man of no depth. In his brother Moody's eyes, he is an affectionate but irresponsible person. His pursuit of hegemonic masculinity heavily relies on others' approval rather than embedding this trait into his core identity. When Pearl leaves Shaker Heights, his male dominance faces challenges from women, which gives a heavy blow to his masculine confidence. He neither admit that he has been given up nor confront his inner fears. Instead, he chooses to escape reality and evade everything. The fear that follows sexual conquest reveals that the construction of identity under the demands of hegemonic masculinity is a continuous performance full of anxiety.

Just like the photograph Mia leaves for Trip, now Trip becomes the object of gaze in the photograph. Mia hammers a few nails into the crack of a hockey chest pad, resembling arrows. Mia uses the photo to suggest Trip that "It's all right to be vulnerable." [5] Trip's passive end to his romance and cognitive stagnation deconstruct the stable myth of elite male identity. When conditions for the defence of patriarchy change, the bases for the dominance of a particular masculinity are eroded.[4]

The Alienated Moody: Intellectual Resistance of Subordinate Identity

Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men.[4] The subordinate status of male homosexuality is particularly evident because, from the perspective of dominance, male homosexuals are akin to women. Therefore, some men who possess feminine traits also belong to a subordinate position.

As the child of a white elite family, Moody lacks the innate confidence of the Richardson family. Unlike his amiable and approachable sister Lexie, and his aloof and indifferent sister Izzy, Moody is physically smaller compared to his brother Trip. His preference for literature and music further accentuates his lack of the typical masculine traits. Instead, he exhibits more feminine qualities such as gentleness, sensitivity, and a slight timidity. These place him at a disadvantage among males and subject him to invisible discrimination. As one of the few sober individuals in the family, Moody's identity construction is an active subversion of hegemonic masculinity within the family. It represents a resistant form of subordinate masculinity.

For Pearl, instead of directly expressing his admiration, he attempts to replace physical competition with intellectual pursuits such as writing poetry and singing, thereby deconstructing hegemonic masculinity. Moody greatly appreciates Mia's artistic pursuit. There is also a seed within him that yearns for romance and wandering, which represents a detachment and resistance against the hegemonic aesthetics of Shaker Heights. Additionally, Moody is the only member of the Richardson family who can understand Izzy. When Izzy is called madman, Moody actively defends her and assists her in the "toothpick incident" as an act of revenge against the school. When community members are numbed by disciplines like "a belief in equality and diversity, truly seeing everyone as an equal." [5] Moody can courageously and clearly state, "Everyone sees race; the only difference is who pretends not to." [5] Through his sensitivity and rationality, Moody challenges the invisible hegemony within the white community. But his resistance ultimately exposes the dilemma of subordinate masculinity.

Although Moody has a deeper spiritual connection with his secret admirer Pearl, Pearl is infatuated with Trip, who embodies hegemonic masculinity. And they develop a romantic relationship. Moody ultimately ends his friendship with Pearl through arguments, humiliation, and avoidance. Whether it is the failure of his unrequited love or Trip's mocking statement that "no one wants to have sex with him," these all reflect Moody's failure in heterosexual competition. Meanwhile it indicates that despite societal progress, hegemonic masculinity still dominates intimate relationships between men and women. After the failure of his unrequited love, he vents his frustration on Pearl, attempting to hide his own cowardice and incompetence. Moody remains caught in the contradiction between class privilege and moral clarity. He disapproves of the so-called "perfectionism" and "equality for all" norms in Shaker Heights as well as the hypocrisy within families. However, he never relinquishes the privileges afforded by middle-class status and relies on everything provided by his elite family. This limitation in awakening suggests that Moody can only become a mild resister within the hegemonic system rather than a revolutionary like Izzy.

The novel concludes by providing Moody with an open-ended space for growth through Mia's picture "a flock of miniature origami birds taking flight". [5] Under the collusion between patriarchy and the middle class, resistance of subordinate masculinity often stagnates at partial individual awakening as well as pros and cons. It is difficult to transform into a thorough revolutionary opposition. However, this "ongoing" resistance continues to undermine the hegemonic order from inside, like sparks that gradually deconstruct the dominant system.

The Outsider Brian: Identity Negotiation Under Racial Identity

The interplay of gender with other structures such as class and race creates further relationships between masculinities.[4] As a black middle-class college student, Brian's masculinity is subject to the intersecting disciplining of racial and gendered structures. Under the hegemonic white masculine discipline, he attempts to construct an elite identity through education, but in intimate relationships, he is still deprived of the ability to construct his subjectivity by systemic forces.

Shaker Heights is renowned for its principle of "equality for all," yet incidents such as "white teachers bullying black children" and the isolation of black families in both geographical and social space continue to occur. Racial discrimination appears like an invisible glass ceiling, transparent yet omnipresent. Therefore, despite the Brian family being part of the middle class, they remain marginalized within white communities. Brian uses education as a tool of resistance, successfully to gain admission to Yale through elite education cultural resources. He refuses to equate blackness with the bottom. This challenges the hegemonic masculinity defined by white elites and demonstrates his determination in constructing his own identity.

Brian's romantic relationship with Lexie, a white middle-class girl, itself transcends racial boundaries and is a powerful means of rejecting racial marginalization. However, within this relationship, Brian remains in a passive position. After Lexie becomes pregnant and decides to have an abortion alone. Brian is never informed, revealing the sense of deprivation of reproductive rights among black males and placing them in a marginalized position both in terms of gender and race. When Lexie proposes breaking up, Brian's sudden rage implies his deprivation of dominance in emotional affairs as a black man. Yet he is powerless. This silent defeat not only signifies individual's tragedy but also serves as compelling evidence of the systematic deprivation of black males' rights to construct a complete autonomous identity despite being a Yale elite.

The novel sharply points out the hypocritical lie of racial equality in standard white communities through its depiction of this black male character. Even in spaces that claim to be inclusive and open, black masculinity remains marginalized and still requires crossing racial and class barriers to construct an elite identity.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the masculinity of four male characters in *Little Fires Everywhere*, this study reveals the complex mechanisms and hierarchical differences involved in the construction of male identity in contemporary American society. Bill consolidates his authoritative identity as "father-lawyer" through complicit masculinity, covertly reinforcing it in both family and professional domains. Trip shapes the image of a "charismatic heterosexual man" through performative hegemonic masculinity, yet exposes his underlying vulnerability and dependency. Moody through intellectual resistance, attempts to define himself outside the patriarchal order but constrained by the contradictions within middle-class values. Brian's "African-American elite" identity remains marginalized under the intersecting oppression of race and gender. Celeste Ng's poetic portrayal of this genealogy of masculinities not only deconstructs the singular myth of masculinity, but also profoundly illustrates that identity construction is a dynamic process influenced by multiple constraints including race, class, and gender. This research provides an intersectional perspective to understand issues of gender and identity in Chinese American literature.

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