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From Control to Collapse: Deconstructing Binary Family Ideals in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*

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Abstract

This paper explores the deconstruction of binary family ideals in Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, with a particular focus on how control and collapse function as central oppositions within the narrative. Through an exploration of the Richardson and Warren families, the study examines how rigid adherence to social norms, especially those shaped by class, race, and gender, exposes the fragility and contradictions of the so-called ideal family. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's theory of binary opposition and feminist literary criticism, the paper analyzes dichotomies such as order versus chaos, stability versus freedom, and biological versus adoptive motherhood. It argues that Ng deliberately

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destabilizes these binaries to reveal their ideological foundations and the limitations they impose on personal identity and emotional expression. By contrasting Elena Richardson's obsession with order and social propriety with Mia Warren's unconventional, emotionally attuned lifestyle, the novel illustrates how alternative family structures can offer deeper forms of connection and authenticity. The study concludes that *Little Fires Everywhere* not only critiques traditional domestic ideals but also redefines concepts of motherhood, identity, and familial legitimacy, thus contributing to contemporary conversations on race, gender, and the evolving definition of family in the American fiction.

Keywords: Binary oppositions, Celeste Ng, Derrida, Family ideals, Identity, Motherhood

من السيطرة إلى الانهيار: تفكيك مثالية الأسرة الثنائية في رواية "حرائق صغيرة في كل مكان" للكاتبة سليست إنغ

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المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة تفكيك مثالية الأسرة الثنائية في رواية حرائق صغيرة في كل مكان للكاتبة سليست إنغ، مع التركيز على كيفية توظيف مفهومي السيطرة والانهيار باعتبارهما مركزين متضادة داخل السرد. ومن خلال تحليل عائلي ريتشاردسون ووارن، تستكشف الدراسة كيف أن الالتزام الصارم بالمعايير الاجتماعية، لا سيما تلك التي تتشكل بفعل الطبقة والعرق والنوع الاجتماعي، يكشف هشاشة وتناقضات ما يُسمى بالأسرة المثالية. وبالاستناد إلى نظرية التقابل الثنائي لجاك دريدا والنقد الأدبي النسوي، يحلل البحث ثنائيات مثل النظام مقابل الفوضى، الاستقرار مقابل الحرية، والأمومة البيولوجية مقابل الأمومة بالتبني. وتجادل الدراسة بأن إنغ تعمدت زعزعة هذه الثنائيات لكشف أسسها الأيديولوجية والقيود التي تفرضها على الهوية الشخصية والتعبير العاطفي. ومن خلال المقارنة بين هوس إيلينا ريتشاردسون بالنظام واللباقة الاجتماعية، وأسلوب حياة ميا وارن غير التقليدي والمنفتح عاطفياً، توضح الرواية كيف يمكن أن توفر البنى الأسرية البديلة أشكالاً أعمق من الاتصال والصدق. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن رواية حرائق صغيرة في كل مكان لا تكتفي بانتقاد المثاليات الأسرية التقليدية، بل تعيد أيضاً تعريف مفاهيم الأمومة والهوية وشرعية الأسرة،

مما يجعلها مساهمة مهمة في النقاشات المعاصرة حول العرق والنوع الاجتماعي والتعريف المتطور للأسرة في الأدب الأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقابلات الثنائية، سليست إنغ، دريدا، المثاليات الأسرية، الهوية، الأمومة.

1. Introduction

1.1 Celeste Ng's Style Writing and Influence

Celeste Ng (1980) is one of the modern American authors whose works examine the issues of family, color, identity, and conflicts of the American suburban. Ng has been praised for her emotionally poignant language and deft insights of cultural strife and family breakdown with works like *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017). Her work blends between the psychological depth and social criticism.

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on July 30, 1980, Celeste Ng comes from immigrant Hong Kong background. Her mother, a chemist, and her father, a NASA physicist, provide scientific and intellectual rich surroundings (Ng, 2017). When Ng was ten years old, the family relocated to Shaker Heights, Ohio; this suburb would eventually serve as the backdrop for her second novel. Growing up in a mostly white and progressive area, Ng grew very conscious of cultural diversity and racial dynamics, an insight that would greatly affect her subsequent work (Ng, 2017).

Early academic passions for Ng were English literature and creative writing. She studied English at Harvard University, then graduated with MFA in writing from the University of Michigan, where she also won the esteemed Hopwood Award for short fiction. These early years sharpened her writing voice and set the groundwork for her novelist career. Published in 2014, Ng's first novel, *Everything I Never Told You*, soon won praise from critics and was chosen as Amazon's Book of the Year. The Lee family a Chinese American family residing in Ohio in the 1970s whose daughter Lydia is discovered dead in a lake Ng, 2014 forms the focal point of the novel. The novel breaks apart the subtleties of familial expectations, racial identification, and gender roles. Ng uses a non-linear narrative to expose the inner life of every family member, thereby tracking Lydia's

death to a poisonous web of unspoken pressures and emotional misunderstandings (Jaggi, 2014, p.67).

Everything I Never Told You was lauded by critics for its deft handling of household quiet and racial conflict. The novel presents psychological portrayal of loss and suppression as well as a mystery. Especially innovative, Ng's subtle approach to Asian American identity offered a multifaceted picture of integration, alienation, and familial responsibility (Cheng, 2016, p.72).

Little Fires Everywhere (2017), Ng's second novel, confirmed her status as a great literary star. Set in the same Shaker Heights where Ng herself grew up, the novel contrasts two families: the rich, rule-following Richardsons and the wandering, creative Warrens more especially, Mia, a single mother and her daughter, Pearl (Ng, 2017, p.48). Tensions of class, color, and motherhood are set ablaze by the story, which centers on a custody dispute over a Chinese American kid. The novel examines privilege, sacrifice, and the boundaries of empathy as it investigates who has the right to parent and what makes a "good mother" (Kirkus Reviews, 2017). Ng's criticism of suburban utopianism is highlighted by her presentation of Shaker Heights as a character in its own right a community consumed with order and control. Originally developed into a hit Hulu miniseries starring Reese Witherspoon and Kerry Washington (Tannenbaum, 2020,p.61), the novel was a New York Times bestseller.

Psychological depth, emotional intelligence, and sociopolitical insight define Ng's work. Her work frequently follows underprivileged voices—especially those of women and people of color—as they negotiate invisibility, expectations, and institutional injustice. Her investigation of silence—that which is left unsaid, secrets kept, and the internalization of society pressures—that is among her strongest suit (Ng, 2014,p.89).

Though emotionally vivid, her writing is clear and under control. She reveals the subtle tragedies that mold her characters' life by means of free indirect talk, therefore entering their awareness (Liu,2020,p.211). By doing thus, Ng shows how larger cultural influences shape private stories by merging the personal with the political. Ng has been quite helpful in advancing discussions on Asian American identity in popular culture. Her

portrayal of Chinese American families in both novels exposes the psychological weight of invisibility and integration as well as questions preconceptions of the "model minority" (Lee, 2015,p.49). Ng lets readers see the diversity of racial identity outside binary conceptions by emphasizing the emotional inner worlds of her characters.

This study addresses several critical issues surrounding the representation of family, identity, and social norms in contemporary American fiction. Despite the widespread acclaim of Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere*, there remains a gap in scholarly engagement with how the novel systematically deconstructs binary oppositions that underpin dominant family ideologies. This study aims to investigate the ways in which Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* critiques and deconstructs traditional family ideals through the use of literary binaries and narrative contrast. The central objective is to examine how the novel interrogates dominant cultural assumptions surrounding motherhood, identity, and domestic stability within a racially and socioeconomically stratified suburban context. This study seeks to:

1. Analyze the narrative deployment of binary oppositions—such as control versus freedom and order versus chaos—in shaping family dynamics and character development within the novel examining the contrasting representations of motherhood and parenting as embodied by the characters of Elena Richardson and Mia Warren, highlighting how these portrayals challenge normative maternal ideologies.
2. Examine the contrasting representations of motherhood and parenting as embodied by the characters of Elena Richardson and Mia Warren, highlighting how these portrayals challenge normative maternal ideologies.
3. Apply deconstructive and feminist literary theories to uncover the ideological underpinnings of traditional family narratives and the ways in which Ng's novel subverts them.

The study raises many questions:

- 1- How does *Little Fires Everywhere* challenge the culturally idealized model of the nuclear family within the American suburban context?

- 2- In what ways do binary oppositions—such as traditional/alternative, control/freedom, and biological/adoptive—operate within the novel to critique normative structures of motherhood and domestic life?
- 3- To what extent can deconstructive and feminist literary theories uncover the ideological instability of moral and familial absolutes presented in the text?

It is significant for its contribution to contemporary literary scholarship by examining how Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* deconstructs traditional family ideals through feminist and deconstructive theories. It reveals how binary oppositions—such as control/freedom and traditional/alternative motherhood—shape cultural perceptions of family, identity, and legitimacy. By highlighting the intersections of race, class, and gender within suburban life, the study underscores the novel's role in challenging normative social structures and broadening the understanding of family in modern American literature.

1.2. Discussion

Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* is not only a narrative of family secrets and suburban conformity but a profound commentary on the multiplicity of what “family” can mean. Set in the tightly regulated suburb of Shaker Heights, Ohio, the novel presents contrasting family structures and questions culturally dominant definitions of motherhood, parenthood, and belonging. By placing a traditional nuclear family alongside non-traditional and culturally marginalized family units, Ng challenges assumptions about what constitutes a stable, loving home and exposes the cultural biases that shape those assumptions.

The Richardson family represents the prototypical upper-middle-class, white American family. With two parents and four children, the Richardsons reflect the idealized postwar nuclear model. Elena Richardson, the matriarch, clings tightly to rules, order, and appearances. Her parenting style is built on predictability and privilege, offering her children material comfort but minimal emotional depth or freedom (Ng, 2017, pp. 21–23).

This model of family, while outwardly successful, is revealed to be brittle and incapable of dealing with deviation. Izzy, the youngest child, rebels against its rigidity, eventually becoming the catalyst for the family's disintegration. Ng uses the Richardsons to criticize the limitations of a family model built on conformity and control rather than emotional flexibility (Miller, 2017, p. 4).

According to Derrida, Western thought is structured around hierarchical oppositions—such as presence/absence, good/evil, speech/writing, male/female, and reason/emotion—where one term is privileged over the other (Derrida, 1976). These binaries are not neutral but ideological, functioning to suppress or marginalize the “other.” In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Celeste Ng criticizes social, cultural, and familial hierarchies by exposing and destabilizing these binary structures within the context of race, motherhood, class, and family norms. Through contrasting families and relational dynamics, Ng reveals how seemingly natural binaries—such as biological/adoptive, traditional/alternative, stable/unstable—are culturally constructed and ideologically loaded.

In the world of Shaker Heights, the Richardson family embodies the ideal of traditional, nuclear family structure: married parents, four children, financial stability, and suburban respectability. This model is unconsciously treated as the norm, while all others are measured against it. The binary here positions “traditional” as natural and morally superior.

“Rules existed for a reason: they brought order to the world. She had grown up with rules, and it had not done her any harm. She had followed the rules, and she was happy, and successful, and safe.” (Ng, 2017, p. 160)

This quote from Elena Richardson encapsulates the logic of binary thinking. The Richardson household is viewed as the correct model because it conforms to what Derrida would call the “logocentric” assumption—that some truths or structures are self-evident and final (Derrida, 1976).

However, Ng juxtaposes this with Mia and Pearl Warren's alternative family unit, destabilizing the traditional/alternative binary. Mia, an unmarried mother and artist, leads

a transient life, yet her emotional connection with Pearl is deeper than that of Elena with her children: “Mia had always been attuned to Pearl, their emotions braided together like fibers in a rope.” (Ng, 2017, p. 198)

The word “braided” here symbolically undoes the clean, binary separation of roles within family. Derridean deconstruction invites us to question why permanence is privileged over emotional proximity, and Ng’s narrative shows that love and understanding transcend the bounds of traditional structure. A critical binary Ng explores is biological vs. adoptive motherhood, particularly in the custody case of Bebe Chow and the McCulloughs. Western family ideology often privileges biological ties as “natural,” but the McCulloughs’ claim to “better” parenting is based on class, race, and stability rather than birthright.

“She left her baby in a box at a fire station. She didn’t even care enough to bring her to a hospital ... I gave her up because I had nothing. Nothing. Not even milk to give her. You think I wanted to?” (p. 212-213)

These juxtaposed quotes highlight the binary logic: abandonment vs. provision. But Ng complicates the binary. The reader is forced to consider whether a parent’s love is measured by economic ability or sacrifice. According to Derrida, deconstruction does not merely reverse the binary (i.e., claim Bebe is better than the McCulloughs) but displaces the hierarchy, showing its instability.

Mia, defending Bebe, expressing this opinion: “You didn’t make her. You don’t know anything about her. She has a mother. She is her mother.” (Ng, 2017, p. 218). This statement pushes back against the McCulloughs’ implicit belief that adoption—by white, affluent parents—automatically confers a “better” life. The deconstruction here is twofold: it questions the supremacy of biology and interrogates how adoption can be a tool of cultural erasure.

Another binary lies between stability (Elena) and freedom (Mia). Elena equates moral virtue with stability, order, and planning. Mia, in contrast, embraces risk, spontaneity, and artistic truth. Initially, Elena’s values are portrayed as rational and Mia’s as chaotic. But the narrative arc reveals the cost of Elena’s rigidity. “She had spent so long constructing a

life, a home, a family, a world that was safe and clean and good, and now everything she had built was falling apart.” (Ng, 2017, p. 295)

Derrida might argue that “stability” is a metaphysical illusion—what he calls presence. Elena’s collapse exposes that her perceived order was always contingent on denial and suppression. Mia’s way of life, though seen as unstable, actually nurtures emotional growth: “Sometimes you need to scorch everything to the ground, and start over. After the burning, the soil is richer, and new things can grow.” (Ng, 2017, p. 295). Fire, functions as a deconstructive metaphor—dismantling in order to reimagine. It aligns with Derrida’s idea of *différance*, the perpetual deferral of meaning and the impossibility of total closure.

Although race is not always foregrounded, the novel implicitly criticizes the binary between white normativity and nonwhite deviation. The Richardson family perceives themselves as liberal and colorblind, yet their actions betray a latent assumption that their whiteness is the universal standard: “We’re not racist,” Mrs. Richardson protested. “We chose her. We picked her out specially because she was Chinese.” (Ng, 2017, p. 222)

This seemingly well-meaning statement reveals the unconscious racism of tokenism. According to Derrida, binary structures are upheld by privileged terms that disguise themselves as neutral—here, whiteness as invisibly normative. Mia and Bebe, as nonwhite mothers, are constantly required to justify their love and choices in ways white characters are not.

Mia’s criticism to Elena cuts through this illusion: “You didn’t make good choices. You had good choices. Options other people don’t have.” (Ng, 2017, p. 223)

This moment deconstructs the myth of meritocracy. Elena’s morality is revealed to be a luxury enabled by racial and class privilege, not intrinsic goodness.

Derrida often explored the metaphysical opposition between presence and absence, especially in language and identity. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, this binary plays out in emotional relationships—especially with children. Elena is constantly present in her children’s lives physically, but emotionally distant: “She had never really known Izzy. Not

truly. There was always something opaque about her youngest daughter.” (Ng, 2017, p. 298).

Meanwhile, Mia, despite being unconventional, is emotionally present. These dynamic reverses traditional expectations and suggests that presence of mind and empathy matters more than physical or social presence. Izzy’s final symbolic act—setting fire to her home—is a violent assertion of her agency. Her act is one of both absence (erasing her identity within the Richardson household) and presence (inscribing her pain into the family history).

In stark contrast to the Richardsons, Mia and Pearl Warren form a minimalist, mobile family unit. Mia is a single mother and artist who raises her daughter on the move, avoiding attachment and permanence. Despite their financial instability, the Warrens exhibit emotional closeness, mutual respect, and shared decision-making. Pearl, although occasionally yearning for the security and structure the Richardsons appear to offer, thrives in an environment where her voice matters (Ng, 2017, pp. 55–58).

Mia’s parenting model represents an alternative approach rooted in emotional availability and creative thinking. It challenges assumptions that stability must be physical or financial and suggests that the quality of emotional relationships may matter more than structure (Day, 2021,p.3). This contrasts directly with Elena’s parenting, which often equates control with love. One of the most powerful representations of alternative family structures in the novel is the custody battle between the white, affluent McCulloughs and Bebe Chow, a Chinese immigrant who once abandoned her baby due to extreme poverty. The McCulloughs adopt the baby, believing they are providing her with a better life, while Bebe fights to regain custody, arguing that biology and culture cannot be replaced by wealth (Ng, 2017, pp. 204–210).

This legal and moral conflict becomes a commentary on cultural relativism in parenting. The American legal system’s initial preference for the McCulloughs reflects an ethnocentric view of what a "fit" parent looks like—often excluding those from marginalized socioeconomic or cultural backgrounds. Ng subtly criticizes the racial and class-based assumptions embedded in institutional decision-making (Smullens, 2021, para.

5). The custody battle also raises questions about transracial adoption. Does providing material comfort justify erasing a child's cultural heritage? The answer, for Ng, is not simple. Through this subplot, she emphasizes that family cannot be measured only by provision but also by cultural identity and emotional connection.

Lexie Richardson's relationship with her Black boyfriend, Brian, introduces another form of alternative family dynamics—interracial romance in a supposedly progressive, but ultimately blind, environment. Lexie's decision to use Pearl's name during a secret abortion (Ng, 2017, p. 218) reveals both her subconscious exploitation of racial privilege and her inability to fully understand Brian's lived experience. This dynamic illustrates how even relationships that appear to transcend racial boundaries can still reproduce inequality. It also speaks to how race intersects with class and gender to shape familial and intimate dynamics. Ng shows that love and intimacy do not automatically neutralize systemic biases.

A recurring tension in *Little Fires Everywhere* is whether motherhood is determined biologically or emotionally. This is best seen in Mia's relationship with Pearl—who is biologically hers—and her connection to Bebe Chow, whom she aids during the custody trial, arguably as a surrogate support figure. At the same time, Elena Richardson believes that her adherence to social norms makes her a better mother, even as she fails to understand her own children.

The novel rejects singular definitions of motherhood, instead suggesting that nurturing, protection, and self-sacrifice are key determinants regardless of biological connection or legal adoption. As Shen and Wang (2019) argue, Ng's work uses narrative perspective to "ethically problematize motherhood as a moral position rather than a legal or biological one" (p. 6).

The setting itself—Shaker Heights—is essential to understanding the novel's commentary on family and culture. The town, with its strict zoning laws, aesthetic uniformity, and history of "progressive" integration, serves as a metaphor for enforced homogeneity. Beneath this controlled environment lie hypocrisies and subtle prejudices that shape how families are perceived and judged (Ng, 2017, p. 13; Miller, 2017, p. 2).

By applying Derrida's theory of binary opposition, we see how *Little Fires Everywhere* unravels the dominant cultural assumptions about family, motherhood, race, and morality. Ng does not simply replace one model with another; rather, she shows how each binary—traditional/alternative, biological/adoptive, stable/free—is constructed and dependent on broader systems of power. Like Derrida's own intellectual fires, Ng's work burns through comforting illusions and asks readers to rethink what lies beneath familiar forms.

Little Fires Everywhere is a literary investigation into the meaning of family in contemporary America. By contrasting traditional nuclear families with alternative structures single mothers, immigrant parents, interracial couples Ng destabilizes cultural assumptions about who gets to be seen as legitimate or loving. Through powerful characters and ethical dilemmas, she compels readers to reconsider the values that underlie their definitions of family. In doing so, Celeste Ng not only tells a compelling story but contributes to broader cultural conversations about race, motherhood, and the institutional frameworks that shape domestic life.

2. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* serves as a nuanced critique of binary family constructs rooted in socio-cultural expectations of control, stability, and normative motherhood. Through a deconstructive literary lens, the analysis revealed how Ng dismantles hierarchical oppositions such as traditional versus alternative family, biological versus adoptive motherhood, and emotional presence versus physical stability. The findings show that Ng reframes the suburban ideal of the nuclear family not as a moral standard, but as a fragile and exclusionary construct sustained by racial, class, and gendered privilege.

By juxtaposing the emotionally rigid Richardson household with the emotionally intimate yet structurally unconventional Warren family, Ng illustrates that familial authenticity is not determined by social conformity but by empathy, agency, and emotional engagement. The narrative further challenges the assumption that material provision or legal structure guarantees parental legitimacy, instead foregrounding affective labor and cultural identity as essential dimensions of caregiving. Moreover, the paper finds that the setting of Shaker

Heights operates as both a literal and symbolic structure of regulated perfection—one that ultimately reveals the inherent contradictions of its utopian ethos. Ng’s deployment of fire as a metaphor for both destruction and renewal serves to destabilize fixed moral binaries, suggesting the possibility of reimagining family beyond rigid societal definitions. *Little Fires Everywhere* critiques the ideological foundations of the “ideal family” by exposing the instability beneath its surface order. The novel invites a re-evaluation of domestic narratives and offers a more inclusive, emotionally resonant, and ethically complex vision of familial relationships in contemporary American literature.

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