

Lydia's Alienation and Societal Burdens: A Marxist Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Lydia's alienation in Ng's everything I never told you through a Marxist perspective, focusing on societal factors contributing to her isolation. The significance of this study lies in uncovering the cultural determinants of alienation, offering insights into the broader implications of these themes in contemporary society. Using a Marxist framework, the study examines how class structures, racial discrimination, and capitalist ideologies shape Lydia's psychological state and her interactions with her family and society. Findings suggest that Lydia's alienation is deeply influenced by the oppressive societal expectations and racial prejudices that stem from capitalist and classist structures, leading to her sense of estrangement and eventual tragic fate. This research highlights the need to critically examine societal pressures and their impact on individual well-being, particularly within marginalized communities.

Keywords: Alienation, Estrangement, Marxist

Introduction

Alienation is a state of estrangement or disconnection from oneself, others, or society. It often results in feelings of isolation or powerlessness (Marx, 1844). Alienation can arise from modern societal structures that dehumanize individuals, causing them to feel disconnected from their actions and relationships (Seeman, 1959). Rousseau stated alienation is a psychological and social condition that arises from the development of civil society. In the 19th century, Hegel brought attention to alienation through a Christian and idealist perspective. Following Hegel, Marx also explored the concept, defining alienation as a sense of estrangement from oneself within the capitalist system.

In addition to the causes of social alienation, Marx identifies the primary cause as living and working within the capitalist system. Instability or upheaval within this system also leads to social alienation. Moving from one country to another or relocating within a country can destabilize a person's norms and social relations, contributing to social alienation. Sociologists like Durkheim observe that individuals who find themselves in the minority concerning race, religion, values, or worldviews may experience social alienation. Furthermore, demographic changes can lead to social alienation when individuals are economically unable to participate in society in what is considered a usual way.

The increasing time people spend on media platforms reduces face-to-face interactions, leading to alienation. One must examine personal perceptions of psychological well-being to comprehend how individuals' attitudes toward gatherings and meet-ups influence their sense of isolation. Alienation is a significant factor in this context. Authors explore and express this

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theme through their characters and autobiographical elements in literature. Thus, literature serves as a primary medium for understanding alienation. In addition to literature, online platforms like Google and personal assessments provide insights into this phenomenon.

Alienation is a term deeply rooted in philosophy, sociology, and psychology, and its nature is continuously evolving. It is directly connected to communities' and nations' ideas, behavior, and thinking. Whenever these elements change, the nature of alienation also changes. Alienation is a product of society and the way people live. When the way of living is disrupted, alienation undergoes notable changes. In the 20th century, existentialist philosophers like Albert Camus examined alienation in the context of individual freedom. For Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, existential alienation arises from the gap between individual consciousness and the external world. When individuals feel disconnected from their environment and perceive it as different from theirs, they experience a loss of consciousness and a sense of alienation.

Changes in social, economic, and cultural contexts continuously shape the manifestations of alienation. By focusing on these contexts, one can clearly understand the current levels of alienation experienced by individuals within a community. Whether through philosophical inquiry, psychological analysis, or sociological study, the examination of alienation reveals its impact on individuals and society. This understanding allows us to draw a comprehensive picture of alienation and its implications in various aspects of life.

About the Author

Celeste Ng, an Anglo-American novelist and short story writer, was born in the United States on July 30, 1980. She has contributed to many literary journals and garnered significant acclaim. Ng's debut novel, *everything I never told you*, was released in June 2014, establishing her as a noteworthy author. In 2012, her short story *girls at play* won a Pushcart Prize, highlighting her talent. Ng's second novel, *little fires everywhere*, was published in 2015 and received widespread praise. Her latest novel, *our missing hearts*, was released on October 4, 2022.

About the Novel

Everything I never told you is a novel by Celeste Ng that delves into the struggles of the Lee family as they grapple with the mysterious death of their teenage daughter, Lydia. The family's inability to move on after Lydia's death is a central theme, marked by a lack of passion and dedication. The novel's plot is constructed with well-drawn character connections that keep readers engaged from start to end. The Lee family faces suffering due to their identity and race, experiencing alienation and mockery within the education system because they are Asian. Themes of family dynamics, unmet societal and familial expectations, and cultural identity saturate the novel. Ng explores secrets, misconceptions, misunderstandings, and human nature's and psychology's complexities.

The primary theme emphasizes that "those left behind must learn to move on." However, the Lee family struggles to break free from the chains of alienation and trauma following Lydia's death. They avoid openly discussing her death, which heightens their tension. The novel's central mystery revolves around Lydia's death and the reasons behind her tragic decision. The burdens of family and societal expectations, along with a lack of understanding within the family, are key factors leading to Lydia's suicide.

Statement of the Problem

The novel *everything I never told you* by Celeste Ng explores alienation, mainly through the character of Lydia Lee. The researchers aim to study Lydia's alienation from a Marxist perspective, focusing on how cultural factors contribute to Lydia's sense of isolation and eventual demise.

Despite being part of a middle-class family, Lydia experiences alienation due to the pressure of societal and familial expectations, compounded by the racial discrimination she faces. The Marxist lens allows the researchers to examine how these external forces rooted in class structures and capitalist ideologies shape Lydia's psychological state and interactions within her family and society. This analysis seeks to uncover the deeper cultural determinants of alienation as depicted in the novel and to understand the broader implications of these themes in contemporary socio-cultural contexts.

Research Objective

1. To analyze Lydia's alienation through a Marxist perspective by examining the societal factors contributing to her sense of isolation.

Research Question

1. How do societal factors, examined through a Marxist perspective, contribute to Lydia's alienation in Celeste Ng's *everything I never told you*?

Literature Review

Alienation is a critical concept in Marxist theory, yet it remains complex and debated. This reinterpretation shifts the focus from Marx's early philosophical writings to his later works, framing alienation not as a subjective experience but as an objective process driven by the appropriation of production results and their conversion into capital. This perspective addresses common theoretical issues, such as essentialism and moral paternalism. It clarifies the paradox of increased social power coupled with heightened feelings of powerlessness and isolation in contemporary capitalism (Øversveen, 2022).

Advances in understanding parent-child contact problems (PCCPs) have been made, but challenges and controversies persist. A multi-factorial perspective is essential, as both parents often share responsibility, though some cases involve apparent fault by one parent. Professionals struggle to distinguish between alienation (unjustified rejection) and realistic estrangement (justified rejection). Debate continues over the use of "alienation" in court, especially when it may obscure issues like intimate partner violence or child abuse. While prevention and education are helpful, severe PCCP cases require family court intervention. More research is needed, but definitive answers remain elusive, complicating decision-making in these complex cases (Fidler & Bala, 2020).

The concept of alienation has been referenced across diverse fields such as theology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry (Johnson, 1973). Fromm (1955) described alienation as a mode of experience where a person feels estranged from themselves, essentially becoming an alien to them. Horowitz (1966) further elaborated that alienation involves an intense separation from three key areas: objects in the world, other people, and the ideas about the world held by others. At its core, alienation is identified with a dissociative state or a sense of separation from some element in one's environment (Kanungo, 1979; Schacht, 1970).

Marx (1844) conceptualized alienation as separating the worker from ownership. In his economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844, he distinguished three forms of alienation from the product of work: alienation in the production process and alienation from society. Webers's treatment of alienation (Gerth & Mills, 1946) is similar to that of Marx, who views alienation as emerging from a perceived lack of freedom and control at work.

Seeman (1959) identified five dimensions of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement, improving upon earlier one-dimensional definitions of the concept. Seeman's (1959) classification has been the foundation for numerous empirical studies (Blauener, 1964; Dean, 1961; Seeman, 1967; Shepard, 1977). However, some scholars have questioned whether these dimensions fully capture the essence of alienation

(Kanungo, 1979; Mottaz, 1981; Overend, 1975), suggesting that powerlessness and meaninglessness might be better understood as either antecedents or consequences of alienation. This critique points to the complexity of alienation and the need for a more nuanced understanding of its various aspects.

The structural determinants of alienation have been broadly studied since Marx's time. In his classic study of industrial workers in various sectors, Blauner (1964) examined work alienation across four American industries: printing, textiles, automobiles, and chemical processing. He identified socio-technical characteristics, such as technology and the division of labour, which contribute to alienation. Blauner (1964) found that alienation was most extreme in the automobile industry's assembly line production, characterized by standardized, routine, repetitive, and highly fragmented work. Conversely, the chemical process industry, where automation replaced skill with responsibility, experienced less alienation. Alienation was lowest among craft workers, highest among assembly line workers, and somewhat reduced in continuous process plants.

Allen and Lafollette (1977) found a direct connection between alienation and both centralization and formalization. Similarly, Aiken and Hage (1966) explored the link between alienation and two structural properties of organizations, formalization and centralization, in a comparative study of sixteen welfare organizations, concluding that alienation was more prevalent in highly formalized and centralized settings. However, the impact of these factors on professionals presents mixed results. Greene (1978) found that formalization increased alienation among professionals, while other studies (Organ & Greene, 1981; Podsakoff, Williams & Todor (1986) suggested that formalization could reduce alienation by decreasing role ambiguity.

In a study of a bureaucratic fire department, Sarros et al. (2002) examined how leader behavior (transactional vs. transformational styles) and organizational structure (centralization, formalization) relate to work alienation. Their findings indicated that transformational leadership was associated with lower work alienation and that organizational structure negatively influenced transformational leadership, indirectly impacting work alienation. This suggests that leadership style and organizational structure interplay significantly in determining levels of alienation among employees.

Blauner (1964) found that blue-collar workers performing repetitive routine tasks with limited autonomy and decision-making experience greater alienation. Conversely, Chisholm and Cummings (1979) found no relationship between job characteristics (variety, control, social interaction, and purpose) and work alienation in their study of a manufacturing firm. However, Simpson (1999) observed that in the electronic era, aspects of the work context, such as contractual work and operating computerized systems, which limit contact with co-workers, contribute to alienation. Kohn (1976) identified two potential sources of alienation: loss of control over the product of one's labour and loss of control over the work process. Similarly, Mottaz (1981) found that lack of control over tasks and lack of meaningful work are predictors of alienation.

Korman et al. (1981) tested a model of alienation among professionals and managers, identifying expectancy disconfirmation and loss of satisfaction as significant factors influencing alienation. Lang (1985) discovered that individuals from high socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to experience alienation when they face a lack of fulfilment. Rosner and Putterman (1991) further suggested that higher education enhances an individual's ability to derive satisfaction from work but also increases dissatisfaction when the work becomes routine and unchallenging. Their findings indicate that while education can raise expectations and satisfaction, it can amplify feelings of alienation if the work does not meet these expectations.

Blauner (1964) used the Roper Fortune Survey questionnaire that asked a range of questions

related to the work experience of the respondent. The five-item scale of alienation developed by Miller (1967) assesses a sense of pride and accomplishment in work; however, their absence need not necessarily imply alienation. Seeman (1967) addressed the issue of self-estrangement at work by asking whether workers experience variety, creativity, responsibility and autonomy on the job. This operationalization of alienation overlaps with work satisfaction (Robinson et al., 1969; Seybolt & Gruenfeld, 1976).

Aiken and Hage (1966) measured alienation in their study based on six questions that essentially address work satisfaction. Interestingly, almost all the questions start with How satisfied are you... (p. 501), and then go on to assess various aspects of work. Seybolt and Gruenfeld (1976) call for a refinement of the operationalization of alienation owing to measurement overlap with the concept of satisfaction.

Kohn (1976) used a Guttman scale to measure alienation, using subscales for powerlessness, self-estrangement, normlessness, and cultural estrangement. However, the specific questions assess a broader sense of alienation, including alienation from society or life in general, rather than precisely alienation from work. Similarly, the measures of Korman et al. (1981) and Lang (1985) address personal and social alienation. Mottaz (1981) measured alienation using powerlessness, meaninglessness and self-estrangement. He concluded that powerlessness and meaninglessness are determinants of self-estrangement. Kanungo (1982), although purported to measure work alienation, muddles alienation with involvement. Hirschfeld and Field (2000) employ a ten-item measure of alienation containing items measuring meaninglessness.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology to explore Lydia's alienation in Ng's *everything I never told you* through a Marxist lens. Focusing on textual analysis, the research delves deeply into the novel's narrative, language, and character interactions to uncover the underlying societal factors contributing to Lydia's isolation. The qualitative approach is appropriate for this study as it allows for a nuanced examination of how class structures, racial discrimination, and capitalist ideologies influence Lydia's psychological state and interactions within her family and society. Through detailed textual analysis, the research identifies vital passages and dialogues that illustrate Lydia's alienation and the broader cultural determinants at play.

Using textual references from the novel ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the primary source, providing a direct connection between the text and the theoretical framework. This approach facilitates an in-depth understanding of how societal pressures and racial prejudices, rooted in capitalist and classist structures, shape Lydia's experiences and contribute to her estrangement and tragic fate. By focusing on qualitative data and textual evidence, the study highlights the complex interplay between individual experiences and systemic factors, offering insights into the impact of societal expectations on personal well-being.

Data Collection

This study used books and journals. As far as primary data is concerned, the original text of the novel *Everything I Never Told You* by Ng was used. For secondary data, different books, journals, and the Internet were studied.

Theoretical Framework

Karl Marx's framework on alienation provides a robust theoretical basis for analyzing Lydia's isolation in Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*. Marx's exploration of alienation within capitalist systems underscores how economic structures profoundly impact individual well-being and social relations.

Marx posits that alienation occurs when workers are estranged from the products of their labour, reducing them to mere commodities in the capitalist market (Marx, 1867). This

detachment from the work process and the products they create leads to a profound sense of isolation and dehumanization. In *Capital* (1867), Marx illustrates how capitalism diminishes labour to a commodity, stripping workers of their individuality and creative expression. This loss of control and personal connection with their work fosters a deep sense of alienation in a capitalist society.

Additionally, Marx's concept of social alienation expands on this by highlighting how individuals or groups may feel disconnected from societal norms and meaningful social interactions (Marx, 1844). This broader perspective on alienation is crucial for understanding Lydia's experiences in Ng's novel. Her sense of estrangement is not merely a personal issue but is deeply intertwined with societal expectations and racial prejudices rooted in capitalist and classist structures. Marx's framework thus provides a valuable lens for examining how these systemic factors contribute to Lydia's isolation and tragic fate, revealing the intersection of economic, social, and psychological dimensions of alienation.

Data Analysis

The present study explores the concept of alienation articulated by Marx in the 1930s, mainly focusing on estrangement within society or community. The novel *Everything I never told you* depicts alienation as stemming from family dynamics and the characters' struggles with moving on while also addressing broader issues of loneliness. According to Marxist theory, alienation arises in a capitalist system when individuals or communities do not reap the benefits of their labor. This study examines the portrayal of alienation in the novel, with a particular emphasis on Lydia's alienated state. From the outset, the story illustrates themes of alienation and loneliness, setting the stage for an in-depth analysis of these issues. "Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet. 1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but an innocent fact: Lydia is late for breakfast" (Ng, 2015, p.1).

Applying the Marxist theory of alienation to the opening lines of Celeste Ng's *everything I never told you* reveals deep understandings into Lydia's estrangement and the broader socio-economic dynamics at play. The lines "Lydia is dead. But they don't know this yet. 1977, May 3, six thirty in the morning, no one knows anything but an innocent fact: Lydia is late for breakfast" highlight Lydia's alienation in several ways.

Firstly, the assertion "Lydia is dead" (Ng, 2015, p.1) contrasts sharply with the routine detail of her being "late for breakfast," highlighting the disconnection between her internal reality and the external perception of her life. This disparity reflects Marx's notion of alienation where individuals are estranged from their own essence and the meaning of their actions. Lydia's true state is obscured by the triviality of daily routines, suggesting that her profound internal struggles and alienation are unrecognized and undervalued by those around her.

Secondly, the reference to the time and the ordinary event of being late for breakfast emphasize the routine and mechanical nature of daily life, reinforcing the idea that Lydia's individuality and emotional depth are neglected within a capitalist framework that prioritizes efficiency and conformity over personal fulfilment. These lines illustrate how Lydia's alienation stems from a broader socio-economic context where her true self is marginalized and her existential struggles are trivialized by the superficial norms of daily life.

In the opening lines of the novel, Marilyn, Lydia's mother, enters Lydia's room in search of her daughter, only to find the bed undisturbed, with the pillow still fluffed and the covers neatly in place. As Marilyn searches the entire house and every room for Lydia, she returns empty-handed, reflecting the family's disturbance and growing anxiety. These initial moments reveal the unsettling reality that Lydia, a young girl, has vanished, and her absence is already impacting her family deeply. The novel opens with this crisis, exposing the gravity of the situation. Lydia's sister, in a state of shock, mentally questions, "can you be kidnapped?" This reaction underscores the severe emotional and psychological strain the family is under,

highlighting their fear and confusion. The author uses this tense scenario to introduce the family's turmoil and set the stage for the unfolding narrative, emphasizing the deep sense of loss and the unsettling reality that has begun to unravel for the family (Ng, 2015, p. 23).

In the novel, Lydia, just sixteen years old, is missing from home, prompting her mother to search the entire house in vain. The police's response underscores a view on teenage behaviour, suggesting that many teenagers leave home without warning due to conflicts with their parents, often without their parents' awareness. They reassure James that ninety-five percent of teenagers return home within 24 hours and are generally safe, noting that in most cases, girls are simply rebelling against parental authority. Despite this reassurance, the police remain suspicious, considering the possibility that Lydia's disappearance may be related to youthful behaviour. This perspective contrasts sharply with the family's fear and dread. Nath's observation of Lydia at school; sitting silently while others chatter, subtly returning her notebook after others have copied her homework, and then taking the bus alone; highlights her profound isolation.

From a Marxist perspective, Lydia's alienation is apparent through her extreme isolation at school, at home, and in her daily life. Marxist theory suggests that alienation occurs when individuals are estranged from their work, their peers, and themselves within a capitalist society. Lydia's silence and solitary behavior at school reflect a deeper estrangement from her social environment, where she feels disconnected and undervalued. The lack of meaningful interaction and support at school reflects the broader capitalist pressures that devalue individual needs and contributions, exacerbating her sense of isolation. Lydia's loneliness and eventual tragic fate are rooted in a system that prioritizes conformity and productivity over personal well-being and emotional support. Her alienation is a direct consequence of these systemic issues, reflecting the Marxist critique of how capitalist structures perpetuate feelings of isolation and disconnection among individuals.

In 1977, the schooling system in Ohio profoundly affected Lydia, a solitary Chinese girl who experiences alienation. Her quiet and solitary behavior in the cafeteria makes her an outsider in a predominantly native environment. The other students view Lydia with suspicion and curiosity, reflecting a lack of acceptance and integration of her race and ethnicity within the community. This cultural exclusion is evident in their reluctance to engage with Lydia, reinforcing her sense of isolation.

At school, Lydia's loneliness is intense. The native students are absorbed in their social interactions, chatting and enjoying their time together, while Lydia remains isolated. She lacks friends to accompany her or to share her school experience. Her solitary existence is further emphasized by the fact that other students frequently copy her homework, yet she has no one to collaborate with or discuss academic work. This dynamic underscores her alienation, as Lydia's contributions are exploited without acknowledgement.

The systemic and social rejection Lydia faces at school contributes significantly to her sense of alienation. Her exclusion from social interactions and the lack of support from peers reflect broader issues of racial and cultural intolerance. This isolation is a key factor in Lydia's sense of alienation, which, in turn, plays a critical role in her tragic decision to end her life. The narrative illustrates how the schooling system, influenced by racial biases and cultural insensitivity, perpetuates Lydia's loneliness and exacerbates her alienation, ultimately leading to her suicide.

You know you're the only girl in the school who's not white. You and Nath, you're practically the only Chinese people in the whole of the middle wood, I bet" (Ng, 2015 p. 192)?

The lines highlight Lydia's sense of alienation in a predominantly white community. Through textual reading, these statements expose the racial and cultural isolation Lydia experience, which aligns with Marxist theories of alienation. These lines address Lydia's racial difference, underscoring her status as an outsider within the school environment. The emphasis on Lydia

being "the only girl in the school who's not white" and one of "the only Chinese people in the whole of Middlewood" draws attention to her racial marginalization. The repetitive focus on her ethnicity emphasizes the societal divide that separates her from her peers. This exclusion is not merely a matter of individual prejudice but reflects broader systemic issues within the capitalist framework that marginalize those who do not conform to the dominant racial norms. Marxist theory of alienation suggests that individuals become estranged from themselves and their communities when they are marginalized by socio-economic structures. Lydia's alienation can be analyzed through this lens as she is isolated not only due to her racial background but also because the capitalist system in the school and the community fails to acknowledge or accommodate diversity. The systemic racial biases and cultural insensitivity evident in these lines contribute to Lydia's sense of being devalued and excluded.

The Marxist perspective emphasizes how capitalist societies create divisions and hierarchies based on race and ethnicity, leading to the alienation of marginalized groups. Lydia's experience of being one of the few Chinese students in a predominantly white school underscores the alienation she faces as a result of these structural inequities. Her racial identity becomes a source of isolation rather than an element of her individuality that is embraced and valued.

In short, these lines reflect the Marxist critique of capitalist societies that perpetuate alienation through racial and cultural exclusion. Lydia's situation exemplifies how systemic structures and societal attitudes can alienate individuals, making them feel disconnected from both their peers and the larger community. This sense of alienation, powered by racial marginalization and lack of acceptance, contributes to Lydia's loneliness and eventual tragedy.

Where you going" Lydia around the day, peeked "None of your business?" (Ng, 2015 p.152). These lines underscore the impact of keeping secrets within Lydia's family and how these hidden truths contribute to their collective grief. Lydia and her family harbor secrets that cause significant emotional distress, ultimately leading to Lydia's tragic decision to end her life. Lydia's struggles are exacerbated by her internalized desires, such as her wish to study subjects beyond her mother's expectation for her to become a nurse. Her failure to express these desires results in deep-seated grief and emotional turmoil.

In Lydia's honor, the school has closed for the day, and Lydia's classmates come, lots of them. Looking at them, James and Marilyn realize just how long it has been since they've seen these girls: years (Ng, 2015, p. 59).

These lines reveal several layers of alienation experienced by Lydia and her family. The fact that Lydia's school has closed in her honour highlights a moment of recognition and collective mourning that contrasts sharply with the family's prior experiences of isolation. The presence of Lydia's classmates at the school, after such a long time, underscores the disconnection between the family and their community. James and Marilyn's realization of how long it has been since they last saw these girls emphasizes their estrangement not just from Lydia's social world but from the larger community as well.

From a Marxist perspective, this text reflects the broader theme of alienation within capitalist societies, where the personal and social connections of individuals are often neglected or undervalued. The closure of the school and the gathering of Lydia's classmates only serve to remind James and Marilyn of their previous detachment from their daughter's life and the community's superficial engagement with her. This moment of collective remembrance contrasts with the daily indifference and isolation Lydia experienced, highlighting the alienation embedded in their social relations.

Marxist theory posits that alienation is not only a matter of individual disconnection but also a reflection of systemic issues that hinder meaningful human relationships. The delayed acknowledgement of Lydia's life and the emotional distance revealed in the line reflect the capitalist society's tendency to overlook the personal struggles of individuals until they reach

a dramatic climax. This scene illustrates the alienation that Lydia faced both from her peers and from her family, further underscoring how systemic and social structures perpetuate disconnection and isolation.

“Upset about everything.” Jack’s voice is lower now, almost a sigh. “About her grades. About her parents. About her brother leaving for college. Lots of things.” He sighs then for real, and when he speaks again, his voice is brittle, ready to snap. “How should I know?” (Ng, p. 67)?

These lines reveal Jack’s fragmented and detached response to Lydia’s multifaceted issues. His description of Lydia’s concerns, her grades, her parents, and her brother leaving for college highlights the scope of her alienation, as these problems are not isolated but interconnected aspects of her broader sense of disconnection and dissatisfaction. The record of her worries reflects how her sense of alienation is rooted in various aspects of her life, including academic pressure, familial relationships, and personal changes. Jack’s sigh and hard tone emphasize his emotional exhaustion and detachment, which symbolize the larger systemic neglect and alienation Lydia faces. Marxist theory argues that such detachment is a result of capitalist and social systems that fail to address individual needs and emotional well-being, leading to feelings of isolation and disillusionment. Jack’s inability to fully understand or empathize with Lydia’s situation “How should I know?” (Ng, p. 67) reflects a lack of meaningful communication and support, further worsening Lydia’s alienation.

The Marxist perspective highlights how Lydia’s struggles are symptomatic of a broader socio-economic context that prioritizes productivity and efficiency over personal fulfilment and emotional support. Jack’s fragmented and indifferent response reveals the systemic issues that contribute to Lydia’s sense of estrangement, emphasizing how societal and familial structures can perpetuate feelings of disconnection and inadequacy. The lines exemplify how personal alienation is both a result of and a reflection of larger systemic failures to address and support individual emotional needs.

He had wanted to say what had been growing in his mind for days: what had happened to Lydia was nothing they could lock out or scare away. Then the look on Marilyn’s face stopped him: sad, and frightened, but angry too, as if he were to blame for something (Ng, p. 108).

In the lines, a sense of Marxist alienation is revealed through the emotional and communicative barriers between the characters. These lines reveal the inner conflict and the systemic alienation that pervades the family’s dynamics. The character’s realization that Lydia’s situation is beyond their control: “nothing they could lock out or scare away” reflects an understanding of the limitations imposed by their socio-economic and emotional environment. This awareness of helplessness aligns with Marxist theory, which suggests that individuals are alienated from their own experiences and realities when systemic forces restrict their ability to address or influence their circumstances.

The character’s hesitation to express thoughts, triggered by Marilyn’s reaction, further exemplifies alienation. Marilyn’s face is described as “sad, and frightened, but angry too, as if he were to blame for something.” Her mixed emotions of sadness, fear, and anger reveal a web of personal and systemic conflicts. Marxist theory highlights how alienation can lead to interpersonal tensions, as individuals project their frustrations and fears onto others. In this case, Marilyn’s anger and blame reflect how systemic failures to address their needs have created a space for guilt and frustration to emerge.

This interaction sums up the Marxist critique of how capitalist and social systems contribute to emotional alienation. The characters’ inability to communicate openly and effectively, coupled with the systemic limitations they face, underscores the alienation from their own experiences and each other. Marilyn’s reaction and the character’s reluctance to speak highlight how systemic pressures and emotional burdens can fracture family relationships, deepening the sense of isolation and disconnection that Marxist theory critiques.

The entire family is affected by their secrets, which contribute to their collective depression

and inability to communicate openly. These unspoken issues create a barrier between family members, preventing them from supporting each other and resolving their conflicts. The novel's title, *everything I never told you*, further emphasizes this theme, suggesting that the family's secrets remain hidden from the readers as well. The lack of transparency and communication within the family perpetuates their suffering and isolation, illustrating how secrecy and unaddressed emotional issues can have devastating effects on relationships and individual well-being.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In *everything I never told you*, Celeste Ng delves into themes of alienation through the lens of individual experiences, which can be analyzed using Marxist theory. The novel portrays how various forms of alienation stemming from race, cultural expectations, and familial dynamics affect Lydia and her family, leading to a tragic culmination of these forces. Marxist theory of alienation, with its roots in Karl Marx's analysis of labour under capitalism, is instrumental in understanding Lydia's plight. Marx identified alienation as the estrangement of individuals from their labour, themselves, and their community within capitalist systems. This theory provides a framework for examining how Lydia's alienation manifests in her personal and social spheres. Her exclusion from her predominantly white school, marked by classmates' insensitivity to her ethnicity, reflects a broader systemic failure to integrate and value her identity. This cultural isolation is symbolic of the Marxist critique of capitalist societies, where marginalized individuals often face systemic neglect and emotional detachment.

The specific lines detailing Lydia's alienation; her being one of the few Chinese students, the lack of meaningful connections, and the emotional distance within her family, highlight how societal and systemic issues contribute to her sense of isolation. Lydia's struggle with her academic pressures and familial expectations further exacerbates her alienation. The Marxist perspective helps elucidate how these individual experiences of exclusion and disconnection are symptomatic of broader structural deficiencies.

The passage where Lydia's classmates attend a school closure in her honour, after years of absence, illustrates the superficial nature of societal engagement. This gesture of remembrance contrasts with the prior neglect Lydia experienced, reinforcing the idea that meaningful acknowledgement often comes only after tragedy. This is consistent with Marxist critiques of how capitalist societies tend to overlook personal struggles until they become too significant to ignore.

The lines about Jack's awareness of Lydia's unresolved issues and Marilyn's reaction reveal the interpersonal complications of alienation. Jack's realization that Lydia's problems cannot be simply "locked out or scared away" reflects his understanding of the limitations imposed by their environment. Marilyn's mixed emotions: sadness, fear, and anger toward Jack further illustrate how systemic alienation permeates familial relationships, causing individuals to project their frustrations and blame onto one another. This emotional strain, intensified by systemic issues, underscores how alienation affects personal connections and communication within the family.

Celeste Ng's novel offers an exploration of alienation through its depiction of Lydia's life and the surrounding familial and social dynamics. Marxist theory provides a valuable lens for understanding how systemic and social forces contribute to Lydia's sense of isolation and disconnection. By examining the impact of race, cultural expectations, and familial relationships through a Marxist perspective, the novel reveals how broader socio-economic structures perpetuate alienation, ultimately leading to Lydia's tragic end. Ng's narrative illustrates the complex interplay between individual experiences and systemic influences, shedding light on the enduring relevance of Marxist critiques in understanding contemporary issues of alienation.

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