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PARENTING STYLES AND EMOTIONAL ALIENATION IN *EVERYTHING I NEVER TOLD YOU*

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Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of parenting styles in Everything I Never Told You (2014) by "Celeste Ng", through the lens of Diana Baumrind's parenting style theory and Catherine Belsey's textual analysis model. The novel presents a complex depiction of family dynamics through the characters Marilyn and James Lee, whose parenting reflects a combination of authoritarian and neglectful styles. Their high expectations, emotional distance, and inability to communicate effectively with their children create psychological pressure that deeply influences the identities and emotional well-being of their children, particularly Lydia Lee. The study highlights how parental expectations and emotional unavailability shape family structure and contribute to identity crisis, silence, and emotional alienation. The findings reveal that parenting styles in the novel are closely connected to societal expectations, cultural pressures, and psychological conflicts, demonstrating the significant role of parenting in character formation and narrative development.

Keywords: Parenting Styles, Authoritarian Parenting, Neglectful Parenting, Emotional Alienation, Identity Crisis

1. Introduction

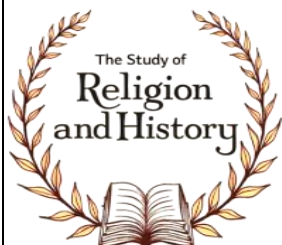
Parenting is one of the most important aspects of human existence because it shapes values, behavior, and identity. Literature frequently presents parenting as a central theme through which authors explore emotional development, family relationships, and social realities. Diana Baumrind (1967) identifies parenting as a demanding process and classifies parenting styles into authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful categories.

The relationship between parental authority and children's independence has remained a major concern in literary studies. Authors use family structures to examine how strictness, emotional absence, or excessive control influence psychological and emotional growth. Child psychologists such as Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget also emphasize the role of parental guidance in emotional and cognitive development.

Everything I Never Told You (2014) portrays Marilyn and James Lee's parenting as a blend of authoritarian and neglectful styles. Their high expectations and emotional unavailability create a difficult family environment that shapes the identities and behaviors of Lydia, Nath, and Hannah. This study focuses on how parenting styles are represented in the novel and how they influence the children's emotional and psychological lives.

1.1 Background of the Study

Literature reflects social realities and human experiences through themes, settings, and character relationships. Family serves as the first institution where individuals learn values,



communication, and social behavior. Parenting therefore becomes a significant literary theme because it influences children's personality, emotional growth, and life choices.

In literary history, parenting has often been connected with emotional suffering and social conflict. Shakespeare's *King Lear* presents destructive parental decisions, while Charles Dickens explores neglect and abuse in novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. Contemporary fiction continues this exploration, and Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You* presents parenting as deeply connected with identity, emotional isolation, and family dysfunction.

The novel is set in 1970s Ohio and follows the Chinese-American Lee family. Marilyn projects her unfulfilled ambition of becoming a doctor onto Lydia, while James pressures Lydia to become socially accepted and popular. Their parenting combines strict expectations with emotional absence, resulting in anxiety, loneliness, and identity confusion in their children.

This study applies Diana Baumrind's parenting style theory and Catherine Belsey's textual analysis model to investigate how authoritarian and neglectful parenting shape the emotional and psychological outcomes of the characters.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Parenting strongly influences emotional and psychological development both in real life and in literature. *Everything I Never Told You* illustrates how parental expectations and emotional neglect affect the decisions, identities, and emotional stability of children.

The study aims to examine how parenting styles in the novel contribute to emotional suffering, identity crisis, and behavioral outcomes. It particularly focuses on how authoritarian control and emotional neglect shape Lydia and Hannah's lives.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To examine parenting styles portrayed in *Everything I Never Told You*.
2. To investigate the impact of parenting styles on the lives of the characters.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How are parenting styles depicted in *Everything I Never Told You*?
2. What are the effects of parenting styles on the characters' lives?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to literary and psychological discussions by examining how parenting affects emotional development and identity formation. It highlights literature as a reflection of real-life family relationships and demonstrates how parental behavior shapes children's psychological well-being.

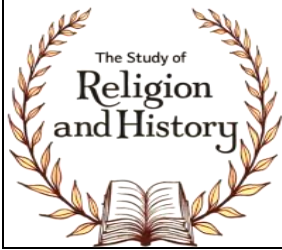
The research is also significant because it combines literary analysis with Baumrind's parenting style theory, offering insight into the relationship between parenting, emotional alienation, and identity crisis.

1.6 Justification of the Study

Everything I Never Told You is selected because of its detailed representation of family dynamics and parenting conflict. The novel presents the emotional consequences of parental expectations within a Chinese-American family in the 1970s.

Baumrind's theory is relevant because it provides a structured framework for analyzing authoritarian and neglectful parenting, while Catherine Belsey's textual analysis model allows close reading of language, ideology, and emotional representation in the text.

1.7 Limitation of the Research



Previous studies on *Everything I Never Told You* mainly focus on identity crisis, silence, ethnicity, and immigrant experience. Limited research specifically examines parenting styles as the central factor shaping the characters' emotional and psychological conditions. This study therefore focuses primarily on authoritarian and neglectful parenting and their effects on Lydia and Hannah.

2 Literature Review

Psychology and literature are closely connected because literary texts often explore human emotions and behavior. According to Wellek and Warren (1956), literature is a creative representation of life and society. Psychological criticism helps readers understand characters' motivations, conflicts, and emotional experiences.

John Bowlby's attachment theory emphasizes the importance of emotional attachment between parents and children, while Lev Vygotsky highlights the role of social and cultural environments in development. These theories support the idea that parental behavior significantly influences emotional growth.

2.1 Theory on Parenting Styles

Diana Baumrind categorizes parenting into four styles: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglectful.

2.2 Authoritarian Parenting

Authoritarian parents enforce strict discipline and obedience with limited emotional warmth. Such parenting often leads to anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem in children.

2.3 Authoritative Parenting

Authoritative parenting combines discipline with emotional support and encourages independence and confidence.

2.4 Permissive Parenting

Permissive parents are emotionally responsive but provide limited control and discipline.

2.5 Neglectful Parenting

Neglectful parents show low responsiveness and limited involvement in children's emotional and social development.

2.6 Review of Related Studies

Studies on *Everything I Never Told You* mainly focus on silence, ethnicity, identity crisis, and family dysfunction. Schweitz (2019) explores silence and identity, while Y. and Zhai (2019) analyze Lydia's identity crisis. Other studies investigate immigrant identity, female depression, and dysfunctional family relationships.

However, limited research directly examines the novel through Baumrind's parenting style framework. This gap creates space for analyzing how authoritarian and neglectful parenting influence character development.

3 Research Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and interpretive research approach. Qualitative research focuses on meaning, interpretation, and subjective experience. Interpretivism emphasizes understanding social and emotional realities through language and context.

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The study applies Diana Baumrind’s parenting style theory to examine parental behavior and its psychological effects on children. The research mainly focuses on authoritarian and neglectful parenting styles.

Baumrind’s Parenting Styles
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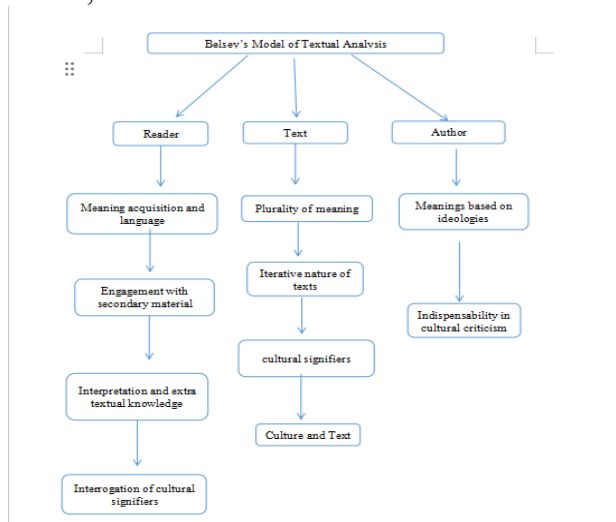
	Authoritarian Parents	Permissive Parents	Authoritative Parents	Neglectful Parents
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Not very nurturing or warm ■ Makes many maturing demands ■ Exerts high control ■ Expects compliance with few reasons ■ Does not give permission for expression ■ Uses a power approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Very nurturing and warm ■ Makes few maturing demands ■ Exerts little control ■ Does not expect compliance ■ Gives lots of permission for expression ■ Uses a powerless approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Very nurturing and warm ■ Exerts high control ■ Makes high maturity demands ■ Gives reasons for compliance ■ Permits expression from child ■ Uses a reasoning approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Disengaged and uninvolved ■ Keeps interactions and contact with child to a minimum ■ Does not respond to child’s expressions ■ Does not care whether child is compliant ■ Used a hands-off approach

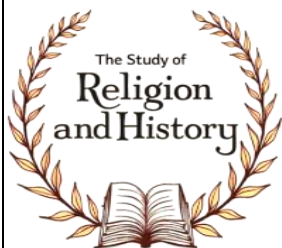
Children From Each Parenting Styles

	Authoritarian Parents	Permissive Parents	Authoritative Parents	Neglectful Parents
Socially	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ less skilled with friends ■ can be bullies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ acts on own self-interests ■ low impulse control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ active in the environment ■ assertive with friends and own needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ poor social skills ■ less interested in making friends with others
Emotionally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ fearful, angry, and hostile under stress ■ apprehensiveness about tasks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ aloof and sometimes unfriendly ■ low self-control and self-reliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ empathic and understanding ■ very self-reliant and has high self-control 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ low self-control and self-reliance
Academically	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ takes school seriously ■ very competent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ less competent ■ less serious about school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ most competent ■ serious about personal achievements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ least competent ■ poor achievement

3.2 Textual Analysis

Catherine Belsey’s textual analysis model is used to closely examine language, symbolism, and emotional representation in the text. The study analyzes selected passages related to parenting, identity formation, and emotional isolation.





4. Analysis

4.1 Context

Everything I Never Told You explores family dysfunction and emotional suffering within the Lee family. Marilyn and James project their unfulfilled dreams and insecurities onto their children, especially Lydia. Their parenting combines strict expectations with emotional distance, creating psychological pressure and identity confusion.

4.2 The analysis focuses on two major aspects:

1. Portrayal of Parenting Styles
2. Impact of Parenting Styles on Children

Portrayal of Parenting Styles

Marilyn and James as Authoritarian and Neglectful Parents

Marilyn and James demonstrate both authoritarian and neglectful parenting. Marilyn imposes strict academic expectations on Lydia because she wants her daughter to fulfill her own dream of becoming a doctor. James, meanwhile, pressures Lydia to become socially accepted and popular.

At the same time, both parents remain emotionally distant. They fail to recognize Lydia's emotional struggles, loneliness, and identity crisis. This combination of pressure and emotional absence creates psychological distress within the family.

The opening line, "Lydia is dead and they don't know this yet" (Ng, 2014, p.1), immediately reflects emotional disconnection in the family. The delayed realization of Lydia's absence symbolizes weak communication and emotional neglect.

Similarly, Lydia's social isolation becomes visible when the family creates a list of Lydia's supposed friends: "these girls have never been Lydia's friends" (Ng, 2014, p.15). This highlights how little her parents understand her emotional reality.

Marilyn's parenting also reflects authoritarian control when Lydia struggles academically: "Imagine yourself older and unable to find a job" (Ng, 2014, p.171). Instead of emotional support, Marilyn uses fear and pressure to control Lydia's performance.

Another example appears when Marilyn "thumbtacked the failed test to the kitchen wall" (Ng, 2014, p.172). This action reflects strict surveillance and humiliation rather than encouragement, emphasizing achievement over emotional well-being.

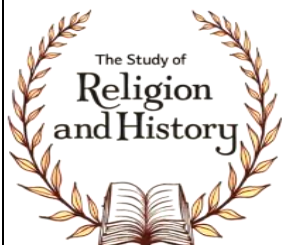
James's parenting also contributes to Lydia's emotional suppression. His advice to "force yourself to smile" (Ng, 2014, p.260) reflects pressure to conform socially and hide authentic emotions.

Overall, the novel presents parenting as emotionally detached and achievement-oriented, where parental expectations overshadow individuality and emotional well-being.

3. Impact of Parenting Styles on Lydia

Lydia becomes the primary victim of authoritarian and neglectful parenting. Her quietness, academic decline, social withdrawal, and emotional instability reveal the damaging effects of excessive pressure combined with emotional absence.

The repeated descriptions of Lydia as silent and isolated reflect her inability to express emotions within the family environment. The novel states that Lydia "sits silent while the others chatter" (Ng, 2014, p.15). The contrast between "silent" and "chatter" highlights her emotional withdrawal and social disconnection.



Lydia's academic decline demonstrates the psychological burden created by authoritarian parenting. Marilyn's constant emphasis on achievement increases Lydia's anxiety and fear of failure. Lydia repeatedly agrees to her mother's expectations through the words "Yes. Yes. Yes." (Ng, 2014, p.160), reflecting obedience rather than genuine desire.

The emotional consequences of neglectful parenting are also evident in the passage: "Their mother's absence gnawed at them quietly, a dull and spreading hurt" (Ng, 2014, p.54). The phrase "dull and spreading hurt" reflects the slow emotional damage caused by parental absence.

Lydia's emotional suffering often goes unnoticed by her parents. During a dinner scene, Lydia "shrugged and barely glanced up from her plate," while her father "assumed this meant nothing new" (Ng, 2014, p.20). This demonstrates emotional disengagement and lack of parental attentiveness.

The novel further reveals Lydia's internal conflict when she imagines herself "a golden retriever" but recognizes herself instead as "a mutt, braced for hostility" (Ng, 2014, p.180). This contrast reflects the tension between imposed expectations and her damaged self-image. Lydia gradually internalizes guilt and responsibility for family problems. She believes pleasing her parents will restore emotional stability, leading her to suppress her authentic identity and emotional needs.

The metaphor of the lake symbolizes emotional emptiness, uncertainty, and loss of identity. Lydia's death ultimately represents the destructive consequences of parenting that prioritizes achievement over emotional connection.

4. Impact of Neglectful Parenting on Hannah

Hannah experiences neglect differently from Lydia. Unlike Lydia, who receives excessive pressure, Hannah becomes emotionally invisible within the family.

The novel frequently portrays Hannah observing family conflict silently while remaining unnoticed by her parents. One important image shows Hannah hiding beneath the table and believing that "her parents will forget she's there" (Ng, 2014, p.115). This moment symbolizes emotional neglect and invisibility.

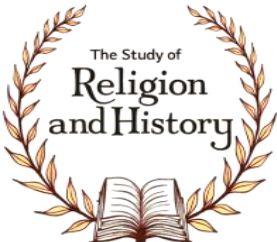
Hannah develops withdrawal and emotional distance as coping mechanisms. Her silence and isolation reflect the effects of growing up in a family where emotional communication is absent.

Baumrind's neglectful parenting framework explains Hannah's low self-worth and emotional insecurity. The lack of parental attention shapes her identity and reinforces feelings of insignificance.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This study examined parenting styles in *Everything I Never Told You* through Diana Baumrind's parenting style theory and Catherine Belsey's textual analysis model. The analysis reveals that Marilyn and James Lee practice a combination of authoritarian and neglectful parenting.

Marilyn imposes strict academic expectations on Lydia, while James pressures her to gain social acceptance. Their parenting prioritizes achievement and conformity over emotional support and communication. As a result, Lydia experiences anxiety, loneliness, emotional suppression, and identity crisis.

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The study also demonstrates how neglectful parenting affects Hannah, who grows emotionally invisible within the family structure. Both children suffer from emotional deprivation, lack of understanding, and weak communication.

Ultimately, the novel presents parenting as a powerful force shaping emotional development and identity formation. The combination of authoritarian control and emotional neglect leads to psychological distress, fractured identity, and emotional alienation.

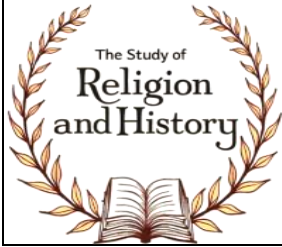
Future researchers may compare *Everything I Never Told You* with other contemporary novels focusing on family relationships and parenting. Comparative studies may further explore how cultural expectations influence parenting styles and emotional development.

Researchers may also investigate adaptations of the novel into visual media to examine how parenting and emotional conflict are represented differently across forms.

Further studies can expand the discussion by exploring sibling relationships, immigrant identity, and cultural pressure alongside parenting theories.

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