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Nadira PUŠKAR-MUSTAFIĆ

International University of Sarajevo
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Hrasnička cesta 15
BiH – 71210 Ilidža, Sarajevo
npuskar-mustafic@ius.edu.ba

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DECONSTRUCTING THE AMERICAN DREAM: RACE, CLASS, AND POWER IN CELESTE NG'S *LITTLE FIRES EVERYWHERE*

Abstract

This article examines how Celeste Ng's novel *Little Fires Everywhere* deconstructs the American Dream by revealing the racial and class-based binaries that shape inclusion, power, and identity in suburban America. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, Edward Said's Orientalism, Lisa Lowe's critique of the model minority myth, and Homi Bhabha's concept of the third space, this article argues that Ng reveals the illusion of equal opportunity by exposing how conformity to white, middle-class norms becomes the price of belonging. By using a nonlinear narrative, complex character dynamics, and a critique of commodified diversity, the novel questions the promise of equal opportunity and shows how privilege is maintained through exclusion. Ng's novel challenges the binary logics of success versus failure and insider versus outsider, revealing how marginalized characters resist and reframe the terms of belonging within structures of conditional inclusion.

Keywords: Celeste Ng, *Little Fires Everywhere*, Asian American literature, American Dream, deconstruction, identity, privilege, postcolonial theory, racial binaries, model minority, third space

Introduction

The American Dream is often described as the belief that every individual, regardless of background, can achieve success through hard work and determination. As James Truslow Adams defined it in *The Epic of America*, it is “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone” (370). While this vision promises opportunity and the possibility of social and economic advancement, it has historically excluded those who do not conform to dominant racial, cultural, and class norms.

Asian Americans have often been represented through stereotypes such as the “perpetual foreigner,” the “model minority,” the submissive “lotus blossom,” or the dangerous “dragon lady.” Portrayals like these lack nuance, reducing their complex identities to simplistic caricatures.¹ Over time, however, Asian American authors such as Carlos Bulosan, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan have challenged these harmful narratives by writing memoirs and fiction that explore identity formation, intergenerational conflict, and cultural inheritance on their own terms.² While their work has contributed to a more authentic representation of the Asian American experience by making both their internal and external struggles visible, Celeste Ng’s *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) goes a step further by interrogating the deeper ideologies and institutions that sustain inequality.

Shaker Heights, the setting of *Little Fires Everywhere*, is a meticulously planned suburban community that reveals how surface-level liberal ideals conceal the deeper influence of racial, class, and gender hierarchies. By positioning marginalized and privileged characters in binary opposition, Ng demonstrates how experiences of displacement or belonging shape their approaches to motherhood and life more broadly, pushing some toward compliance and others toward rebellion. Through this contrast, the novel ultimately shows that access

¹ For a discussion of the “lotus blossom” and “dragon lady” stereotypes, see *Keywords for Asian American Studies* (Ponce 227). For literary depictions reinforcing these and related tropes, see London’s *The Unparalleled Invasion* (1910), which presents Asians as a “Yellow Peril” threat (Davé 149–53); Buck’s *The Good Earth* (1931), which frames Asians as perpetual outsiders (Leong 98–102); and Steinbeck’s *East of Eden* (1952), which contributed to the “model minority” image of quiet discipline and apolitical assimilation (Davé 149–53).

² Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* critiques racial and labor oppression experienced by Filipino immigrants (Nguyen 29–32). Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* explores cultural identity and female agency through myth and memoir (Roh 492–95), while Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* examines generational tensions and bicultural struggle (McCage 515–22).

to the American Dream is conditional and often granted only to those who conform. In addition to character contrasts, Ng also employs a nonlinear narrative structure and uses the setting itself to examine how identities are managed, commodified, or excluded.

This paper argues that *Little Fires Everywhere* deconstructs the American Dream by dismantling the binaries that sustain it: insider versus outsider, success versus failure, and privilege versus marginalization. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Lisa Lowe's critique of the model minority myth, and Homi Bhabha's theory of the third space, the analysis demonstrates how Ng challenges the illusion of equal opportunity. Rather than offering resolution, the novel presents identity and belonging as fluid and contested, shaped by the systems that govern who is allowed to succeed and who remains on the margins.

Background of the Study and Theoretical Frameworks

America has long been imagined as a land of opportunity, drawing immigrants in search of liberty, prosperity, and a better future. At the heart of this ideal is the American Dream, which promised that it was “open to every man, theoretically at least, to rise from the very bottom to the top,” with wealth serving both as a symbol of success and a means of accessing power and opportunity (Adams 181). This ideal, in theory, envisions a meritocratic society in which success is based on individual effort rather than a racial or class background. In practice, however, access to this promise has always been shaped by systemic barriers that privilege some groups while excluding others. The very social structures that claim to provide equal opportunity often end up reinforcing racial and class hierarchies through exclusion.

Asian Americans have often been marginalized within this national narrative. From the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to the World War II internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans, Asian American histories have been defined by displacement and exclusion.³ These episodes highlight how belonging in America has often depended on race, revealing that the American Dream was never equally accessible to all. As Ronald Takaki observes, Asian Americans have been “judged not by the content of their character but by their complexion” (13).

³ The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) barred Chinese laborers until 1943, while Executive Order 9066 authorized the internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during WWII.

This systematic bias is reinforced not only through law and policy, but through cultural representation. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) offers a critical framework for understanding how dominant narratives construct non-Western identities as inferior, exotic, or threatening. Said argues that "knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, in a sense creates the Orient, the Oriental, and his world" (40). These representations are not neutral but serve to legitimize the West's authority over what it deems foreign. In *Little Fires Everywhere*, Ng responds to such portrayals by revealing how characters like Bebe and Mia are seen as unfamiliar or unstable simply because they fall outside dominant cultural expectations, even within a liberal and outwardly inclusive setting.

Lisa Lowe expands on these ideas in *Immigrant Acts* (1996), where she critiques the myth of the model minority. This myth, she argues, presents Asian Americans as obedient, disciplined, and successfully assimilated, thereby masking ongoing inequality. Lowe describes it as a version of "homogenization of Asians" (68). This construction not only erases the diversity of Asian American experiences but also functions as a tool of racial containment, rewarding compliance with dominant racial and social norms while obscuring the systemic inequalities that persist. She further distinguishes between "internal racism," enforced through policies and cultural norms, and "external racism," which defines Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners (179). Ng's novel illustrates both forms: Bebe's struggle for custody and Mia's displacement reveal how conditional the promise of inclusion truly is. Bebe, an Asian American single mother, does not fit the model minority myth; she lacks financial security, special talents, and, despite her hard work in an underpaid job, remains invisible within the system, denied access to the American Dream.⁴

Extending Lowe's critique of conditional belonging, Homi Bhabha introduces the concept of the *third space*, which further complicates fixed notions of identity and inclusion. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that identity is never singular or fixed, but always negotiated in a liminal space of hybridity. The *third space* allows for the disruption of dominant discourse, as it becomes a site of tension and cultural production (113–14). In Ng's novel, this space is

⁴ Although Mia's race is not specified in the novel, she is portrayed by African American actress Kerry Washington in the 2020 Hulu adaptation. As a single mother and artist who takes on cleaning jobs, Mia falls outside normative success ideals often associated with the model minority myth. While this myth is most commonly linked to Asian Americans, it can also be extended to scrutinize other racial minorities who are judged against similar unrealistic standards of socioeconomic achievement and social conformity.

occupied by characters like Izzy Richardson and Mia Warren. Although Izzy is born into privilege, she refuses to conform to the rigid expectations of her family and community. Mia, Pearl's mother, is a nomadic artist who chooses love and motherhood over the stability and privilege her artistic talent could have afforded her. Pearl herself, as the child of a working-class single mother navigating Shaker Heights, also embodies this liminality, moving between worlds of race, class, and family expectation.

Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction deepens this critique by challenging the idea that meaning, whether in language, society, or ideology, is ever stable or self-contained. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes that "the trace is not only the disappearance of origin... but the origin of the origin" (xviii), underscoring that what seems foundational is itself constructed through difference and absence. In *Writing and Difference*, he further argues that "the concept of structure and even the word 'structure' itself are as old as the episteme" (Derrida 278), pointing to how seemingly natural social structures are long-standing constructs.

Ng reflects this deconstructive impulse by presenting Shaker Heights as a space of order and predictability, only to expose how that order is maintained through exclusion and silence. Her nonlinear narrative and shifting focalization challenge binary divisions and call into question the notion of fixed identities.

Although *Little Fires Everywhere* has received attention for its themes of race, motherhood, and privilege, this paper takes a more explicit, intersectional, and structural approach. Rather than isolating these categories, the analysis weaves them together using the theoretical frameworks of Said, Lowe, Bhabha, and Derrida. Ng's novel not only portrays marginalization but interrogates the very binaries, such as inclusion/exclusion, conformity/resistance, and stability/disruption, which sustain it.

Narrative Structure and the Myth of Linear Success

The first significant binary in *Little Fires Everywhere* is a non-linear plot countering traditional linearity. The novel begins with a disastrous scene, as Elena Richardson, one of the main characters, watches her house burn down. To make the climactic opening more palpable, Ng begins with the community's reaction: "Everyone in Shaker Heights was talking about it that summer: how Isabelle, the last of the Richardson children, had finally gone around the bend and burned the house down" (Ng 1). The scene then rewinds into the past, re-

tracing the events that led to the fire. While non-linear narration is common, especially in contemporary literature, Ng's inversion of traditional storytelling signals a broader deconstructive impulse, challenging the assumption that stories (and, by extension, lives) must follow a predetermined, logical path.

One of the ideas Ng challenges through her non-traditional circular structure is the stability of the American Dream. It is built on the belief that success follows a clear, step-by-step path where hard work and the right choices lead to prosperity. This belief is echoed in Adams's original definition of the American Dream, which describes a society where theoretically anyone could rise from the bottom to the top (181). Ng complicates this promise by showing how race, class, and gender quietly determine who gets access to opportunity and who is left behind, regardless of effort or intention. However, Ng also reveals that even those who seemingly have full access to the Dream, like Elena Richardson, find it ultimately unfulfilling. This underscores the notion that the American Dream is not only inaccessible to many but also a flawed ideal for those who attain it.

Mrs. Richardson seemingly attains the American Dream by following its prescribed steps to success: attending college, getting married, raising a family in a suburban dream house, and building a stable, predictable career. However, the very Dream that is supposed to make her feel content and secure becomes the source of her frustration, leaving her with a sense of profound emptiness. The internal unraveling she experiences is reflected in the novel's fragmented structure, which suggests that a linear, straightforward path is mechanical and at odds with the natural unpredictability of life.

This tension between outward stability and inner discontent plays out most clearly in Elena's personal life. She builds her world around control and order, believing that structure ensures success and stability. However, this obsession extends beyond her own achievements and into her home and family, particularly in her relationship with her youngest daughter, Izzy. Izzy becomes the clearest disruption to the picture-perfect life Elena has constructed, exposing the weak foundations of her family's supposed stability. Although Elena meticulously plans every detail of her life, including motherhood, Izzy's premature birth and rebellious spirit continually disrupt her expectations, leaving Elena feeling insecure and resentful. Ng highlights this longstanding frustration: "Mrs. Richardson remained annoyed with Izzy all week, though truth be told, she was usually annoyed with Izzy for some reason or another. The roots of her irritation were long

and many-branched and deep” (Ng 89). Even before Mia’s arrival, Izzy refuses to conform to the rigid ideals of success her family upheld. Ultimately, Elena’s need for control breeds the very chaos she seeks to avoid, just as the novel’s non-linear structure mirrors this unraveling. Although Elena believes that careful planning leads to happiness, her life fractures under the weight of unmet expectations. She fails to control Izzy, Mia, and Bebe, women whom she implicitly expects to submit to the social hierarchies of family, class, and race.

In a Derridean sense, the novel operates through *différance*, where the meaning of events is never fixed but constantly deferred, understood only in hindsight. By disrupting linear time, Ng exposes the instability of the ideals that Shaker Heights represents. The very structure of the novel rejects the idea that life’s path is straightforward, moving from one milestone to the next, and instead highlights its disruption and unpredictability.

Izzy Richardson emerges as the major agent of disruption in *Little Fires Everywhere*, ultimately setting fire to her home and shattering the illusion of stability her family has carefully maintained. Throughout the novel, Izzy forms a clear binary with the rest of the Richardsons, rejecting the privilege her family embodies. Unlike her siblings, who comfortably fit into commodified identities shaped by the compromised American Dream, with Lexie as the privileged overachiever, Trip as the effortlessly charismatic rich boy, and Moody as the brooding intellectual, Izzy refuses to assimilate. Her resistance to conformity deepens through her friendship with Mia Warren, a struggling non-white artist and single mother who rejects the materialistic ideals of Shaker Heights. Before setting fire to her family home, Izzy finds in Mia a kindred spirit, someone who, like her, resists being shaped by societal expectations. Their shared rejection of conformity echoes Noam Chomsky’s critique of consumerist culture and the version of the American Dream that encourages it. Chomsky argues that individuals are pressured to accept a system that defines “what the proper life would be, what kinds of gadgets you should have,” and are conditioned to “spend [their] time and effort gaining those things that [they] do not need or do not want” as a measure of success (Chomsky 144–45). Izzy’s defiance challenges these expectations, revealing how both she and Mia resist a society that reduces identity to something marketable and consumable.

Izzy’s alliance with Mia further challenges the racialized and class-based order of Shaker Heights. However, Izzy herself is neither fully an insider nor

fully an outsider. She inhabits what Homi Bhabha describes as a “third space,” emerging from wealth and privilege yet rejecting the materialistic ideals of her upbringing. While Elena insists that “Rules existed for a reason: if you followed them, you would succeed” (Ng 130–31), Izzy pushes back against the town’s rigid ideal of happiness through uniformity and obedience. In destabilizing the dominant structures from within, Izzy demonstrates that access to wealth and social status does not guarantee belonging, stability, or fulfillment.

Mia Warren plays a crucial role in helping Izzy realize that she does not have to accept the rigid expectations that shape life in Shaker Heights. Recognizing Izzy’s discomfort within her family and community, Mia encourages her to act on it rather than suppress it. While Izzy disrupts Shaker Heights from within, Mia challenges it from the margins. As a single mother, a working-class artist, and a woman of color, Mia does not fit the traditional mold of success promoted by her community. Her rejection of conventional stability and career ambition places her in what Homi Bhabha describes as the third space, a position that allows for resistance, reinvention, and creativity outside dominant norms.

Pearl, who grows up suspended between her mother’s unconventional lifestyle and the Richardsons’ structured, affluent existence, also occupies this third space. She moves between these two disparate worlds but does not fully belong to either. Lacking a clear sense of where she fits, she quietly navigates the racial and class tensions within a society that presents itself as equal. Her experience, alongside those of Mia and Izzy, highlights the complexity of the American Dream as portrayed in the novel. Ultimately, the Dream proves unsustainable, as even those who seemingly attain it, such as Elena, remain unfulfilled. Mia, Izzy, and Pearl, in contrast, reject the assumption that personal fulfillment comes from adhering to a fixed social framework. Instead of conforming, they challenge the community’s linear ideals and align more closely with the novel’s circular narrative structure. This structure suggests that freedom does not necessarily come from stability, but from the ability to question, redefine, and move beyond the roles society imposes.

Setting as a Binary: Shaker Heights vs. the Outside World

Another important binary in *Little Fires Everywhere* is the contrast between Shaker Heights and the outside world. Shaker Heights is more than a background detail; it almost takes on the role of a character, embodying control,

privilege, and meticulous planning to highlight the supposed disorder and unpredictability beyond its borders. The town's emphasis on structure is not merely aesthetic but ideological, reflecting a deeply ingrained belief that success comes through discipline and careful design. This vision mirrors the logic of the American Dream, the belief that "a man by applying himself, by using the talents he has, by acquiring the necessary skills, can rise from lower to higher status, and that his family can rise with him," making "the opportunity for social mobility for everyone... the very fabric of the 'American dream'" (Warner qtd. in Adams 9). Yet in Ng's portrayal, Shaker Heights does not simply reflect this ideal; it enforces it as a form of social control, revealing how the Dream's promises are upheld as much by exclusion as by aspiration. Beneath the town's carefully maintained facade of fairness lies a system that privileges conformity and punishes deviation, exposing the contradictions at the heart of the Dream.

This fixation on control is not limited to social expectations but is inscribed onto the town's very physical environment. Ng underscores this pedantic orderliness by describing how even the appearance of Shaker Heights is meticulously regulated: homes are categorized by style and restricted to specific, approved colors to ensure "aesthetic harmony on each street" (Ng 15). City planning itself follows this rigid philosophy, as "there was a plan for everything," including schools and transportation, all strategically designed to maintain order and suppress unpredictability (Ng 15–16). The city's motto captures this belief in engineered success, asserting that "Most communities just happen; the best are planned" (Ng 15).

This obsessive attention to detail extends beyond infrastructure and into the lives of residents, dictating not just where and how they live but who belongs. Discrepancies in housing, lifestyle, or behavior are perceived as threats to the carefully maintained illusion of success. Elena Richardson, as a product of this environment, mirrors its ideology, upholding order as a means of controlling not only her family but also those she deems outsiders.

Elena's belief in structure, rules, and predictability aligns with what Edward Said identifies as the Orientalist practice of depicting those who do not fit dominant norms as chaotic, disobedient, and in need of control. This framework operates by portraying certain groups as inherently incapable of order, thereby legitimizing their exclusion. As Cromer asserts, "The European is a close reasoner... The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is

eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description... He will often break down under the mildest process of cross-examination” (qtd. in Said 38). In a similar way, Mia and Pearl, whose racial identity is never explicitly stated in the novel but who exist as outsiders, are treated as disruptive elements within Shaker Heights. Their nomadic lifestyle, lack of wealth, and unconventional family structure challenge the community’s rigid definitions of belonging, mirroring how Orientalist narratives have historically framed those outside dominant Western ideals as unpredictable and in need of regulation.

This underlying bias manifests not only in the design of the community but also in the way it polices who belongs. The immediate scrutiny Mia and Pearl face upon their arrival makes this dynamic clear.

As Ng describes, residents note Mia’s lack of a husband, her multiple rings, including one that Mrs. Richardson perceives as a mood ring, and the fact that she pays rent in cash, before quietly observing her old, battered car driving off to the less prestigious side of town (Ng 14). Even before Elena directly engages with Mia, Shaker Heights itself has already marked her as an anomaly, reinforcing the community’s silent mechanisms of exclusion.

Said explains that “in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority,” which ensures that the Westerner can engage with the Orient from multiple perspectives while always maintaining control (Said 7). This perfectly encapsulates Elena’s dynamic with Mia. She believes she is offering Mia an opportunity by providing a rental home and employment, but her generosity is contingent on Mia’s subordination. As Said further elaborates, this superiority “puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (Said 7). In the same way, Elena’s authority over Mia remains intact regardless of the circumstances. Mia’s financial instability and single motherhood render her an outsider despite her intelligence, talent, and work ethic, reinforcing Elena’s sense of superiority under the guise of benevolence.

However, Mia’s refusal to assimilate disrupts this hierarchy, exposing the constructed and exclusionary nature of the American Dream. Unlike Bebe Chow, a Chinese immigrant who must fight for the custody of her own child and who remains at the mercy of the legal system’s racial biases, Mia chooses displacement over submission, demonstrating that survival outside the system is preferable to conditional acceptance within it. Although Mia’s race in the novel is never

explicitly stated, it is implied that she may be a woman of color, which places her within broader questions of racial belonging and conditional inclusion. Her experience can be analyzed through the lens of Lisa Lowe's critique of the model minority stereotype, which rewards minorities who conform to white ideals of productivity and obedience and reinforce racial hierarchies. Even though the model minority stereotype applies specifically to Asian American experiences, its framework can also be applied more broadly to other marginalized groups. Like Bebe's, Mia's worth is measured by her ability to assimilate into white, middle-class norms. By challenging these norms, Mia reveals that inclusion is not solely the result of effort or merit but often depends on one's willingness to comply with dominant racialized and class-based expectations. Mia's resistance extends beyond her own life, as she empowers other marginalized individuals, such as Bebe Chow, to resist those same pressures. As a hardworking Chinese immigrant, Bebe is punished rather than recognized for her effort. She does not fit the model minority image and receives little empathy when, due to postpartum depression resulting from burnout, she is temporarily unable to care for herself and her baby. Instead, she is labeled an unfit mother and stripped of her humanity. Her connection with Mia, however, opens her eyes to a different vision of survival—one that values resilience and genuine care over external validation. In the end, by choosing love and motherhood over material comfort, Bebe chooses resistance. She decides to return to China with her daughter, echoing Mia's earlier decision to prioritize motherhood over fame and material security. In doing so, she reinforces Ng's broader critique of an American Dream that values wealth and conformity more than human dignity.

Ultimately, Bebe's escape challenges more than the ideal of the nuclear family. It confronts the deeply ingrained and false assumption that a child's well-being depends primarily on financial security rather than emotional connection. Like Mia, Bebe refuses to accept a definition of success shaped by the narrow and exclusionary values promoted through the American Dream. Her act of defiance reveals that the American Dream functions less as an open promise and more as a selective myth, one that rewards those who uphold economic ideals while quietly excluding those whose lives do not conform to its narrow expectations.

Female Binaries: Motherhood, Morality, and Power

Little Fires Everywhere presents female characters situated within racial and class-based binaries, identity traits that further influence their approaches to **235**

motherhood, moral decisions, and their access to or exclusion from power. Through the intertwined experiences of Elena Richardson, Mia Warren, Linda McCullough, and Bebe Chow, the novel challenges the rigid framework shaped by dominant white norms by revealing how privilege influences society's definition of who is deemed a *fit* mother.

In doing so, Ng exposes the American Dream's exclusionary vision of the so-called perfect family, a vision often based more on appearances and social status than on genuine care or emotional connection.

The contrast between Elena Richardson and Mia Warren is the most prominent binary in the novel. While Elena raises her children to follow structure and rules, Mia's parenting style is intuitive and adaptable. Elena believes that careful planning and adherence to societal expectations are essential; to her, motherhood is defined by sacrifice and duty. In contrast, Mia and Pearl's relationship, although not without challenges, is built on emotional connection. It develops gradually and evolves over time. Elena clearly raises her children according to the script of the American Dream, emphasizing education, career, marriage, and financial stability. She assumes that the order and predictability she values should extend beyond her family, shaping the way she views and judges other mothers, particularly Mia. Unlike Elena, who measures success by how closely her children meet societal standards, Mia supports Pearl's independence and creativity, prioritizing her daughter's personal growth over conformity.

This contrast challenges the notion of the ideal mother by revealing that motherhood is not a fixed or natural identity, but a role continually shaped by social expectations and systems of power. Derrida's concept of deconstruction is relevant here, as it reveals that identities which appear natural are often the result of historical construction, sustained through hidden exclusions. As Derrida explains, to deconstruct a concept means to trace the structured genealogy of its ideas in the most faithful, interior way, while also uncovering, from a certain exterior that is unnameable by philosophy, the suppressed elements history has concealed (Derrida 6–7). Viewed through this lens, Ng's portrayal of motherhood shows that the ideal mother is not a universal truth, but a cultural construct shaped by ideology. Through the opposition between Mia and Elena, Ng highlights that alternative forms of motherhood that value individuality and emotional connection over wealth and control are often overlooked. In revealing these possibilities, the novel challenges the belief that financial securi-

ty alone defines parental fitness and questions the materialistic and patriarchal foundations on which the American Dream depends.

The custody battle between Linda McCullough and Bebe Chow further deconstructs the racial and class-based hierarchy embedded in motherhood. Linda, a wealthy, white adoptive mother, embodies colorblind privilege, which stands in direct contrast to Bebe Chow's racial and economic marginalization. The dispute arises when Bebe, a struggling Chinese immigrant, leaves her infant daughter in a moment of desperation, only to return and find that the McCulloughs have adopted her. Linda believes her wealth entitles her to motherhood, arguing that she can provide the child with a *better life*, an assumption that equates economic privilege with parental fitness.

When Bebe Chow's lawyer, Ed Lim, questions Linda McCullough, he exposes the superficiality of her efforts to maintain May Ling's cultural identity. Asked how she has helped her daughter remain connected to her birth culture, Linda hesitates and vaguely mentions plans for a *heritage trip* when Mirabelle is older (Ng 208). Pressed further about her knowledge of Chinese language or history, Linda offers no real answer, instead suggesting that perhaps they could take a Chinese cooking class together in the future (Ng 209). Although she insists that "it's very important to us that Mirabelle stay connected to her birth culture," her responses reveal a shallow and performative understanding of racial identity (Ng 208). This detachment becomes even more obvious when the lawyer asks whether Mirabelle owns any dolls that resemble her. Caught off guard, Linda admits, "Well—blond, most of them. One has brown hair. Maybe two" (Ng 209). Her justification that "they just want to make a generic little girl... one that will appeal to everyone" unintentionally reveals her assumption that whiteness is the default, reinforcing an unspoken racial hierarchy (Ng 209).

Linda's responses in this exchange reveal more than personal ignorance; they highlight Ng's broader critique of the colorblind approach to transracial adoption, which assumes that love and financial security alone are sufficient while overlooking the systemic realities of race. The McCulloughs believe that adopting May Ling makes them racially progressive, yet their privilege allows them to dismiss the significance of cultural identity while reinforcing their dominance. This reflects the logic of Orientalism, where Bebe, as an immigrant mother, is not assessed on her ability to parent but is instead framed as unstable and unfit simply because she does not conform to white, middle-class ideals of mother-

hood. As Said explains, “the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (Said 40). Just as colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalist knowledge rather than after the fact (Said 39–40), Bebe’s perceived inadequacy is not the result of an objective evaluation but rather a preexisting narrative that casts immigrant mothers as inherently incapable. Linda insists that race is irrelevant, yet her actions sustain a system that privileges whiteness while refusing to acknowledge its influence.

As the trial unfolds, Bebe realizes the system is not built for her. Even though she is the biological mother, the court favors the McCulloughs. At this moment, Mia’s influence on Bebe becomes clear. By choosing love and motherhood over material security, Bebe rejects the corrupted and commodified version of the American Dream. Her decision is not an act of desperation but rather an expression of agency. Like Mia, Bebe refuses to assimilate just to survive. Instead, she is empowered by stepping outside the structures that seek to define her.

Ultimately, by positioning her female characters as opposites, Ng challenges the binary between the *ideal* mother and the *unfit* mother, showing how privilege, rather than any inherent maternal quality, shapes these categories. Elena and Linda, as privileged white mothers, believe they can secure and define motherhood by imposing rules and stability on their children’s lives. Mia and Bebe, existing on the margins of the society, raise their children in ways that do not conform to mainstream expectations. Mia chooses a nomadic lifestyle and resists the pressure of her artistic freedoms being commodified, while Bebe prioritizes preserving her cultural heritage over mere survival. By presenting multiple and sometimes contradictory images of motherhood, Ng dismantles the idea that there is a single, correct way to raise a child. Instead, motherhood is portrayed as a deeply personal experience shaped by broader forces of race, class, and power.

Racial and Class Binaries: The Model Minority Myth and the Commodification of Diversity

Ng’s portrayal of motherhood reveals how race and class quietly shape who is seen as worthy, suggesting that belonging is never neutral but structured by systems of power. Her critique deepens as the novel moves outward from family dynamics to show how broader forces control access to opportunity. In *Little*

Fires Everywhere, Shaker Heights presents itself as a progressive and inclusive community, yet its idea of belonging remains conditional, favoring those who align with white, middle-class expectations.

Characters like Bebe Chow, whose earlier struggles already exposed the limits placed on marginalized mothers, now reappear within a wider system where race and class quietly determine who is allowed to succeed. Through Bebe's exclusion, Pearl Warren's fragile position as a model minority, and Lexie Richardson's superficial performance of racial liberalism, Ng shows how privilege sustains itself, how assimilation becomes a form of control, and how those who resist or do not conform are pushed to the margins.

The limits of the model minority myth are sharply illustrated through Bebe Chow's exclusion from the American Dream. Unlike Mia Warren, who consciously rejects assimilation, Bebe is barred from even attempting to assimilate. Drawing on Lisa Lowe's analysis, the model minority myth functions by offering conditional acceptance to those racial minorities who align with white capitalist ideals, while casting others as failures (Lowe 98). Although the myth is most commonly associated with Asian Americans, it operates as a broader mechanism of social control that extends to other marginalized groups as well. Success is made available only within narrow, predefined terms set by the dominant white majority. Bebe, as an impoverished immigrant without financial stability or formal education, is denied any access to this conditional inclusion. Her struggle contrasts with Pearl Warren's experience, who, through her academic achievements and discipline, briefly enters the margins of model minority expectations. Yet even Pearl's inclusion proves fragile, as later events reveal how easily that acceptance can be withdrawn. In Bebe's case, there is no opportunity to participate at all. Her maternal fitness is judged entirely against white, middle-class standards, exposing the deeply racialized and class-based hierarchies that decide who is deemed worthy of belonging.

Expanding this critique beyond individual experiences, Ng also exposes the commodification of diversity within Shaker Heights itself. Although the town prides itself on progressive values, its inclusion operates only within boundaries that preserve white control. As Derrida explains, meaning is always deferred, and the promise of inclusion is never fully realized but only gestured toward (Derrida 28). This tension is embodied by characters like Mia and Bebe, whose presence reveals that diversity is celebrated only when it aligns with dominant

expectations. The dynamic becomes even more visible through Pearl Warren and Lexie Richardson, whose interactions further illustrate how privilege manipulates racial and class binaries to maintain its position of dominance.

Pearl, embodying the model minority stereotype, is intelligent, hardworking, and trusting, qualities that initially make her a valuable asset to Lexie. However, as soon as Pearl steps outside this prescribed role, she is discarded, reinforcing the idea that even the so-called ideal minority remains subject to white control. Lexie does not befriend Pearl out of genuine respect or connection, but because Pearl's academic success and trusting nature make her useful. Rather than asking Pearl to write for her, Lexie appropriates Pearl's personal story, using Pearl's lived experiences of hardship to craft a more compelling college essay. This act of exploitation reveals how white privilege allows Lexie to manipulate narratives and bend rules without consequence, while Pearl is left vulnerable. In appropriating Pearl's identity for personal gain, Lexie enacts a dynamic that is subtly Orientalist, treating Pearl's experiences as material to be used rather than respecting them as belonging to an autonomous individual.

Lexie also performs racial progressiveness through her romantic relationship with Brian, a Black student, using their relationship as proof of her *colorblind* liberalism. Yet her commitment to these ideals remains superficial. When asked whether Brian's parents might prefer he date someone Black, Lexie dismisses the possibility altogether by claiming, "Look at me and Brian. We've been together since junior year, and no one gives a crap that I'm white and he's Black" (Ng 40). Her insistence that "skin color doesn't say anything about who you are" reflects a deliberate ignorance of systemic racial inequality, reducing race to something superficial, as if it were merely a matter of appearance rather than a part of daily experience shaped by systemic injustice. Over time, Brian senses the growing distance between them, but their breakup does not come through direct confrontation. Instead, it is Lexie's emotional withdrawal and her unwillingness to share important parts of her life with him that quietly dissolve their relationship. When Lexie becomes pregnant, she chooses to have an abortion without informing Brian, further revealing how easily she exercises her privilege to make decisions while facing no real consequences for her actions. In contrast, minorities like Pearl and Brian are denied such autonomy. Lexie's selective engagement with racial issues underscores her brand of performative diversity, allowing her to project an image of inclusivity without ever being required to confront her own position within racial and class hierarchies.

This pattern extends to how Lexie treats Pearl more broadly. When Lexie signs Pearl's name on abortion papers, she appropriates Pearl's identity to shield herself from consequences of such actions, showing how white privilege quietly uses marginalized lives for protection. Lexie's casual remark that "No one will care if it's your name" (Ng 212) erases Pearl's individuality, treating her not as a person but as a convenient cover. This moment echoes an earlier betrayal when Lexie used Pearl's struggles to craft a more appealing college essay. In both cases, Pearl's identity becomes something Lexie can claim when it serves her needs, first to present herself as vulnerable and later to conceal actions that society often associates with racialized individuals as irresponsible or deviant. Through this pattern, Ng reveals how the model minority myth offers only fragile and conditional acceptance, while Orientalist assumptions continue to cast people of color as inherently suspect. Lexie's treatment of Pearl also shows how gestures of inclusion can mask deeper inequalities, allowing privilege to survive beneath a surface of supposed fairness.

Through presenting the contrasting experiences of Bebe, Pearl, and Lexie, Ng reveals how race and class shape access to opportunity, but also one's sense of belonging and visibility. The novel challenges the American Dream by uncovering the limits of the model minority narrative and the Orientalist framing of marginalized identities. Pearl's *model behavior* of diligence and compliance earn her only conditional acceptance. In contrast, Bebe is denied entry from the start, while Lexie moves comfortably within systems that affirm and protect her privilege. By showing how quickly marginalized individuals can be dismissed, overlooked, or erased when they no longer serve dominant interests, Ng challenges the American Dream Myth's claim that success and acceptance can be earned solely through effort. Instead, she reveals the extent to which race, class, and structural advantage determine who is permitted to succeed and who is left behind.

Conclusion

The question of who is granted belonging and recognition in American society has long been a concern in literature, particularly when it comes to the experiences of racial and class minorities. Celeste Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* does more than portray inequality; it exposes the deeper structures that determine who is allowed to succeed and who is pushed to the margins. This paper has taken an intersectional approach, drawing on Derrida's theory of deconstruction, 241

Said's critique of Orientalism, Lowe's analysis of the model minority myth, and Bhabha's concept of the third space. Together, these frameworks move the discussion beyond surface-level depictions of marginalization to reveal how race, class, and power are embedded in the ideals that sustain the American Dream. In doing so, the analysis offers a new perspective on Ng's novel, showing how systems of privilege and exclusion are woven into the very structures that shape American society.

Through the experiences of characters like Mia, Bebe, and Pearl, Ng shows that survival and agency are not achieved by conforming to dominant expectations, but by choosing to live outside them. These characters occupy what Bhabha describes as a third space, which challenges rigid divisions between insider and outsider, success and failure, and belonging and exclusion. Their refusal to conform exposes the American Dream not as a universal promise of opportunity, but as a selective ideal shaped by racial and class-based boundaries. In doing so, Ng's narrative challenges the Orientalist assumptions that portray difference as deviance and affirms the possibility of identities that resist being reduced to fixed categories or commodified roles.

Ng does not offer a resolution or a simple reversal of power. Instead, she draws attention to the instability of the categories that govern how lives are judged, and futures are imagined. Belonging is shown not to result naturally from effort or merit, but to depend on systems that reward compliance and punish those who do not fit. By exposing these systems and questioning who gets to belong, *Little Fires Everywhere* urges readers to rethink the American Dream not as a promise awaiting fulfillment, but as a structure designed to exclude those who challenge its narrow definition of success.

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DEKONSTRUKCIJA AMERIČKOG SNA: RASA, KLASA I MOĆ U ROMANU *MALI POŽARI POSVUDA* CELESTE NG

Sažetak

Nadira PUŠKAR-MUSTAFIĆ

Fakultet umjetnosti i društvenih nauka
Internacionalnog univerziteta u Sarajevu
Hrasnička cesta 15
BiH – 71210 Ilidža, Sarajevo

Rad istražuje kako roman *Mali požari posvuda* Celeste Ng dekonstruira američki san otkrivajući rasne i klasne binarnosti koje oblikuju uključivost, moć i identitet u američkom predgrađu. Oslanjajući se na teoriju dekonstrukcije Jacquesa Derridaa, Saidov orijentalizam, kritiku mita o uzornoj manjini Lise Lowe i koncept trećeg prostora Homija Bhabhe, rad tvrdi da Ng razotkriva iluziju o jednakim mogućnosti prokazujući kako usklađenost s normama bjelačke srednje klase postaje cijena pripadnosti. Uporabom nelinearnog narativa, složene dinamike likova i kritike komodificirane raznolikosti, roman propituje obećanje o jednakim mogućnostima i pokazuje kako privilegiranost opstaje kroz isključenost. Ng-in roman propituje binarne logike uspjeha nasuprot neuspjehu i insajdera nasuprot autsajderima, otkrivajući kako marginalizirani likovi pružaju otpor i preoblikuju uvjete pripadnosti unutar struktura uvjetne uključenosti.

Ključne riječi: Celeste Ng, *Mali požari posvuda*, azijsko-američka književnost, američki san, dekonstrukcija, identitet, privilegija, postkolonijalna teorija, rasne binarnosti, uzorna manjina, treći prostor