

Insights into Family Dysfunction through Bowen's Theory and Durang's Satire: An Interdisciplinary Approach

by

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Abstract:

*Since the mid-20th century, America has witnessed a revolutionary change in its family institution. This institution epitomized the transformation of family structure, values and norms. The pace of change was breathtaking and unfortunately, families sometimes couldn't keep pace. American playwrights have used familial relationships to trace the changes in the family institution. The purpose of this paper is to explore the dysfunction in the American family due to its deterioration and disintegration during the late 20th century through Christopher Durang's two satirical plays within a psychological framework. Murray Bowen's family systems theory—a psychological theory—is used for this study due to its interdisciplinary nature and its great potential in exploring and supporting literary texts through its concepts. Bowen's family systems theory has eight basic concepts to explore the dysfunction in the family through behavioral patterns. However, due to the limited number of pages allowed, the most applicable three concepts to the texts are chosen for this study which are: 'triangles', 'self-differentiation' and 'family projection process'. Durang's *Baby with the Bathwater* (1983) and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (1985) are selected for the theory's application because of their satirical context to help satirize the disintegration and the dysfunction in the American family. The interdisciplinary study has illustrated how Durang's satirical plays presented a rich medium for the application of Bowen's three concepts. It has also presented the behavioral patterns traced in dysfunctional families. For future research, the study has recommended the application of Bowen's 'nuclear family emotional system' to other literary genres.*

Key Words: dysfunction, triangles, self-differentiation, family projection process, understatement

نظرة متبصرة في الاختلال الوظيفي للأسرة من خلال نظرية بوين وأسلوب دورانج الساخر:

دراسة تطبيقية متعددة التخصصات

تعتبر المؤسسة الأسرية من أهم المؤسسات في المجتمع وقد واجهت الأسرة الأمريكية الكثير من التحديات في منتصف القرن العشرين مما أدى الى تغيير في هيكل الأسرة وقيمتها ومعاييرها وقد ظهر هذا من خلال الاختلال الوظيفي داخل هذه المؤسسة، يهدف البحث لدراسة هذا الاختلال الوظيفي الأسري من خلال تطبيق بعض مفاهيم نظرية النظم الأسرية لموراي بوين على مسرحيتي *الصالح مع الطالح* (1983) و *زواج بت وبو* (1983) للكاتب المسرحي الساخر كريستوفر دورانج. يعد موراي بوين من أهم الأطباء النفسيين المتخصصين في علاج الأسرة وتقوم نظريته النظم الأسرية على دراسة سلوك الفرد بالإضافة الى بقية أفراد الأسرة وهذا لأن الفرد يعتبر جزءاً مترابطاً من الأسرة ولا يمكن فهم سلوكه بمعزل عن بقية أفراد أسرته وتضم نظرية بوين عدة مفاهيم للإرشاد الأسري، يقوم البحث بإستخدام ثلاثة من هذه المفاهيم وهم مفهوم المثلثات ومفهوم تمايز الذات ومفهوم عملية إسقاط الأسرة وهذا لدراسة سلوك الأفراد وأسره في مسرحيتي دورانج. تصنف مسرحيتا دورانج ضمن المسرحيات العائلية ولكن بأسلوب دورانج الساخر ولهذا يقوم البحث بدراسة أسلوب دورانج الساخر وتوظيفه لبعض أدوات السخرية لرسم صورة متكاملة للاختلال الوظيفي داخل الأسرة وهو ما جعل من المسرحيتين مجالاً ثرياً لدراسة سلوك الأفراد وتطبيق نظرية بوين.

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The twentieth century has been identified by American scholars as 'the short', 'the most violent' and 'the most terrible century' in Western history. The validity of such labels is subject to debate; however, it is quite undebatable that the events and the changes that took place during this century were extraordinary. During this century, America was witness to two world wars within a 30-year span. The century also recorded the worst worldwide economic crisis -at the beginning of the 1930s- and the fastest economic growth during the second half of the twentieth century. All the political, social and economic tribulations had an impact on Americans' private lives and led to extensive alterations in the values and norms of families, especially during the second half of the twentieth century. The concept of the extended family within its social and economic network was substituted with the nuclear family that has two generations: the parents and their children. Social critics and cultural commentators were concerned about the 'decline' of the American family which was 'in a state of crisis' (Coleman et al. 37). Many scholars attributed the fragmentation and decline of the nuclear family to several issues as the reduced rate of marriage, the change in gender roles, the high divorce rate, the growth of cohabitation and many other factors.

American drama has been strikingly preoccupied with the problems of family life. Playwrights have used the relationship between husbands, wives and children to reflect the American experience and the American values. Christopher Durang (1949-) is an American playwright and actor whose main concern has been always about the issues of his society and its failing institutions. Durang is selected for this study because of his family-centered plays which focus on the American family institution and present his concern about the family's dysfunction and disintegration during the late 20th century. Durang uses his bitter satire through his tools of irony, exaggeration, understatement, parody and double entendre to show how family fails to deal with the challenges of the age, resulting in suffering and dysfunction. His two satirical plays, *Baby with the Bathwater* (1983) and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (1985), are selected to examine this disintegration within a psychological frame through Murray Bowen's family systems theory. Bowen's family systems theory

is a theory of human behavior that views family as an emotional system. The importance of this theory lies in its interdisciplinary nature and its great potential in analyzing the psychology of the characters in the literary works. The theory has eight interlocking concepts that help understand how different people manage similarly stressful circumstances and know how the emotional system operates in one's family unit so as to be able to deal with life challenges and improve human relationships. Moreover, applying Bowen's theory to the selected texts gives insight into the problems that faced the American family during late twentieth century. In this study, the researcher tries to answer some questions as: Has the theory helped understand and interpret the behavioral patterns of the characters in the two texts? Are Bowen's three concepts extensively fulfilled in the texts? How does Durang's use of satire help highlight the dysfunctional roles in the family? Which play presents a richer medium for application? Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to explore the dysfunction in the American family during the late 20th century by analyzing the behavior of the characters and their familial relations through Durang's two satirical plays *Baby with the Bathwater* (1983) and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (1985), adopting a psychological approach by applying Bowen's 'triangles', 'self-differentiation' and 'family projection process'-the most three applicable concepts of the theory- to these texts.

During a 100-year span from 1901-2000, the American family institution has witnessed a massive change which is more noted in the second half of the 20th century. This change has been described by Richard T. Gill as "revolutionary" because it involved an enormous breakdown in this most durable and fundamental human institution: the family (1). Problems like divorce, illegitimacy, fatherless children, hopelessly inadequate day-care facilities, juvenile crime, drugs, violence and suicide have become epidemic across the country. Moreover, James Wilson, in the preface to the same book, supported Gill's view and believed that the increasing numbers of American children brought up in broken, fatherless and emotionally deprived homes were the most serious tragedy of that time (XVI).

The social changes that have led to this family dilemma were attributed to many aspects. The change in the concept of marriage was one of these aspects of social change. Marilyn Coleman et al. mention that before the 20th century, marriage was a practical arrangement

between a man and a woman. During the 20th century, love and intimacy have become increasingly the focus of marriage (18). Although Americans were more satisfied with the new trend of companionate marriage, by the end of the century, many Americans looked back on the 1950s with great nostalgia. This is because “people began delaying marriage, divorcing at elevated rates, reducing the size of their families, and ignoring the strict division of labor with the husband as breadwinner and the wife as homemaker” (22). The change in gender roles along with women’s empowerment were two other main aspects of this social change during the second half of the 20th century. As the century progressed, a massive increase in the number of women working for wages outside home was detected (Kertzer and Barbagli XI). Being financially secure helped them end unsatisfactory marriages that they couldn’t have previously afforded to do.

Since the mid 20th century, America has experienced rapid economic changes and the American society has turned to a capitalistic one that was governed by consumerism. Thaddeus Wakefield states that the American dream of home ownership and the possession of cars and household goods have become a possibility for large numbers of families following World War II (7). Wakefield examines how marriage, paternal and maternal roles were all affected within a society controlled by a commodity culture. He also discusses how capitalism affected the traditional paternalistic roles of fatherhood within the family. By accepting capitalism’s ideologies, fathers alienated themselves from these traditional constructs of paternal responsibilities and definitions of masculinity, along with alienating themselves from their own family members. Andrew Tolson found it ironic that men support a capitalistic culture that “destroy its own human foundation” (49). This is similar to Karl Marx’s, who states in his essay “Estranged Labour” that “labor estranges from man his own body as well as external nature and spiritual essence, his human being.” Wakefield believes that fathers perceived their children in terms of money and children defined their fathers within the constructs of a materialistic, capitalistic system (24).

American drama, during this century, has been strikingly overoccupied with the problems of the American family. Tom Scanlan emphasizes that its stories provided realistic scenes of family strife, dispute and happiness (5). Playwrights, such as, O’Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are best remembered for their family-centered plays. Geoffrey S. Proehl introduced the image of the alcoholic prodigal which became a popular model of the depressed, alienated and estranged husbands and fathers at

that time (74). Several playwrights utilized this model to show the impact of such social and economic changes on the family in general and males in specific. Eugene O'Neill, for example, presented this model in his play *Long Day's Journey into Night* through the father-son relationship to reflect the complications and pressures of that age. According to Proehl, drinking in American drama was primarily a male activity-fathers or husbands or sons- associated with the term rupture, suggesting pain, brokenness, violence and separation (74). Relatively, many of the characters introduced in the selected plays for the study epitomize this image of the alcoholic prodigal. The absent father is another model introduced by playwrights during this age. Father's absence could be for numerous reasons, such as divorce, illness or abandonment to shirk responsibility. Marsha Norman, for example, dramatized the fatal and drastic effects of the absent father on children in her play *'night, Mother*. Jessie, an epileptic woman, experienced the absence of both her father and ex-husband and was so dissatisfied with her life that she resorted to suicide. Myron Magnet presents a study by Penn State University which reported a dramatic increase in child-poverty levels and in dropping out of high school after divorce, just as Ricky, Jessie's son, did in Norman's play.

Although many playwrights examined family dilemmas and challenges, the study focuses on the selected works of Christopher Durang. Durang is considered a reliable source for this study because most of his family-centered plays are autobiographical ones. Many of the characters portrayed in Durang's plays and many of the issues tackled are derived from his real life journey and are parodied to serve his satirical aim. Robert Brustein states that Durang's family-centered plays were inspired by the continuous failing experiences with his family. After being raised by an alcoholic father who used to abuse his mother and the suffering of his mother from "psychological pain as a result of multiple stillbirths," Durang was a witness to his parents' divorce (VII). Alexis Greene adds that during Durang's second year in college, he slid into depression because of testifying in his mother's divorce case against his father then watching his mother's painful and slow death because of cancer (8). These failing experiences have turned most of his family plays to autobiographical ones, portraying the long-suffering families with dysfunctional member(s). Furthermore, in most of Durang's plays, he deals with themes associated with the deterioration of the American family, such as child abuse, alcoholism, divorce, etc. Moreover, his plays

don't only present a bitter satire of the family institution but also to the other institutions of authority in the society, associated with the family, such as the Catholic Church, the psychiatry and the educational system. Robert Spivak states that Durang, through his works, always traces the harm done by these four institutions, highlighting their follies (Spivak 1). For example, he satirizes the Catholic Church's opinion about birth control, divorce, child abuse and AIDS in some of his plays, such as *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You*, *Laughing Wild* and *Identity Crisis*, in addition to the two selected plays. Christopher Durang's distinctive satirical style is noted in his plays through his skillful use of irony, understatement, exaggeration, parody and double entendre to attack these institutions. Greene describes Durang as "a moralist" who criticizes "insincere and dangerous human behavior with that ancient theatrical tool, critical laughter (39). Most of Durang's plays reflect how family failed to deal with human suffering while embodying madness and idiocy.

The interdisciplinarity of the topic also reflects the important role of psychology through Murray Bowen's theory in examining the dysfunction in the family which is highlighted in Christopher Durang's literary works. If literature presents how human beings "behave in dealing with their problems and environment," then psychology helps explain "human's psyche through human's observable patterns" (Connolly). This shows that both disciplines are interconnected. Carl Gustav Jung recommends psychology for the study of literature because all the actions and thoughts of the characters in literary works are derived from the human psyche which is "the womb of all the sciences and arts" (216). So, psychological theories have helped discover the characters' psyche and clarify the meaning of the provided literary text. Jung adds that:

The novels which are most fruitful for the psychologist are those in which the author has not already given a psychological interpretation of his characters, and which therefore leave room for analysis and explanation, or even invite it by their mode of presentation.... An exciting narrative that is apparently quite devoid of psychological exposition is just what interests the psychologist most of all. Such a tale is built upon a groundwork of implicit psychological assumptions, and, in the measure that the author is unconscious of them, they reveal themselves, pure and unalloyed, to the critical discernment. (218)

Family therapy is a psychological approach or model that explores the dynamics of family life and which was conducted by therapists in the USA in the mid-1950s (Hall 2). Carl V. Rabstejnek mentions that before the new movement of family therapy, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts used to focus on the person's already developed psyche, de-emphasizing the role of the surrounding members, especially family. Rabstejnek says that family therapy was a new approach to psychology where family has become the main focus, "de-emphasizing the individual factors". M. S. Kolveson and R. G. Green have compiled the attempts of providing models for family therapy since 1962 in a book.

Murray Bowen (1913-1990) is one of the pioneers of family therapy and his family systems theory has been adopted by several institutions to explain how people perform in groups. Michael E. Kerr defines the theory as mainly a theory of human behavior that deals with the family as "an emotional unit" and which employs "systems thinking" in examining and interpreting the complex relations of the individuals in this system. According to Jenny Brown, Bowen's theory mainly focuses on patterns that explore and defuse anxiety in the family (94). To him, individuals in this family system are interconnected and cannot be understood apart from this system. Kerr further emphasizes that any change in the functioning of one member will lead to a change in the functioning of the rest. How Bowen views family is further explained below in the article "Family Systems Theory":

A family is a system in which each member had a role to play and rules to respect. Members of the system are expected to respond to each other in a certain way according to their role, which is determined by relationship agreements. Within the boundaries of the system, patterns develop as certain family member's behavior is caused by and causes other family member's behaviors in predictable ways. Maintaining the same pattern of behaviors within a system may lead to balance in the family system, but also to dysfunction.

For example, if a wife is depressed and fails to perform some of her tasks, the husband may take up some of her responsibilities to keep the balance which overburdens the husband. The change in roles may keep the

stability in the relationship, but it may also lead to dysfunction as the husband may not be able to maintain this role for a long time.

Bowen introduces to the theory eight interlocking concepts which present the behavioral patterns of the individuals in a family while dealing with anxiety in an attempt to defuse it. Triangles, self-differentiation and family projection process are selected for this study because they are related to the themes tackled in the selected texts. C. Margaret Hall explains triangles as the smallest relationship that involves three members and not two. During times of anxiety, the two members pull a third one to form a triangle in an attempt to ease this tension (17). The differentiation of self is the second concept and is viewed as the substantial concept of this theory. G. Pirooz Sholevar states that individuals with low self-differentiation take decisions based on emotions and fuse with others to decrease anxiety (“Couples Therapy” 426). On the other hand, those who have high self-differentiation build their judgment on facts and don’t fuse easily with others. Family projection process is the third concept which occurs when the child becomes the sole focus of the parents, being viewed as their shared “problem”, in an attempt to decrease the tension in their relationship (Hall18). Although the three concepts of the theory are defined in this section, they will be examined in detail later in the paper with the analysis.

Very few essays have been written tackling the concept of the family systems and how the dysfunction of one member could affect this system. The first essay tackles the theory in a very broad way and shows through Thomas Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge* how the family system is affected by having an alcoholic member. Another essay uses Emily Bronte’s *Wuthering Heights* to show that alcoholism is transgenerational. A five-page-essay is also written about applying this theory to a movie called *Sweet Home Alabama*. The application is conducted very broadly, highlighting the difference between the open system and the closed system. The contribution of the researcher to this paper is in focusing on three of the eight interlocking concepts of Bowen’s theory to analyze and examine the deterioration of the American family in the second half of the 20th century. This research presents the first application of two out of the three concepts which are “triangle” and “self-differentiation” to a literary work. The third concept which is “family projection” has been applied to a play by Tennessee Williams; however, the phases of this concept were not studied. Accordingly, this paper will be the first paper to extensively apply the three concepts of Bowen’s theory to two satirical plays by Christopher Durang.

The Marriage of Bette and Boo (1985) is one of the two selected plays for the study and is considered a semi-autobiographical play. It presents the devastating family issues in the American society through the representation of Bette, a long-suffering wife, a depressed mother and a ceaseless nag, and Boo, an alcoholic passive husband, in addition to their son, Matt, the narrator, who portrays the pain of living in a shattered and dysfunctional family. The family becomes increasingly estranged as Bette's pregnancies result in a series of stillborn infants. Bette and Boo suffer from communication problems mainly evolving from Boo's alcoholism and, eventually, they get separated and divorced. Durang introduces more issues through the other couple, Joan, Bette's neurotic sister and Nikkos, her disappearing husband who shirks responsibility. We are also introduced to Bette's mother who adopts a live-and-let-die attitude towards raising children and to Paul, Bette's father, who has had a stroke that left him pronounce vowels incomprehensibly. Moreover, Durang completes the insane picture by introducing Boo's father who drinks too much and verbally abuses his wife. Dysfunctional family members are presented on all levels regardless of their gender or age.

Baby with the Bathwater (1983) is the other play selected for the study. It depicts the disintegration in the American family through the couple, John and Helen, who can't carry out their responsibilities. John is an unemployed father who considers himself taking a break and who doesn't want to do anything or be responsible for anything. On the other hand, Helen, his wife, lacks self-confidence and panics when she has the idea of taking any responsibility. The wife tries to get rid of her responsibilities by divorce or by ignoring the whole world. After the parents try to escape their familial and parental responsibilities towards their own baby, the monstrous nanny arrives to take over the responsibility. Although the nanny is the only member in the family who takes action and suggests solutions, she is unqualified for the roles entitled to her and things end up in disaster. She believes that pampering babies spoils them and carelessly gives the baby a rattle made of asbestos, lead and Red Dye No. 2. Daisy is the son who always appears in dresses as his parents have never bothered themselves to check his sex, leaving him confused about his identity. After having more than 1,700 sexual partners that has made him unable to identify his identity, Daisy undergoes therapy and after hundred sessions, he is assured by the doctor that he is overcoming his childhood experience.

Christopher Durang, through his family-centered plays, and Murray Bowen, through his theory in the field of psychology, have both contributed to a better understanding of the mechanism of the American family systems during the second half of the 20th century. This paper presents an interdisciplinary study as it adopts a psychological approach for examining the dysfunction in the American family during the late 20th century. The theory helps provide insight into the behavioral patterns of the characters in relation to their families by applying three of the interlocking concepts of Bowen's Family System to Christopher Durang's two satirical plays *Baby with the Bathwater* (1983) and *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* (1985). The three concepts that will be used in this paper are triangles, self-differentiation and family projection process.

'Triangles' is one of the basic concepts of family systems theory as it provides a balancing force for family systems during high rate of anxiety. According to the article entitled "What are the eight interlocking concepts?", Bowen believes that a two-person dyad in a family system is suitable as long as everything is calm. However, triangles are the best form of human relationship systems when anxiety increases in the family. Michael P. Nichols adds that when two members in a family face problems and the rate of anxiety increases, one of them pulls a third person to relieve this tension (*Family Therapy* 128). In Christopher Durang's *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, Boo's problem of alcoholism leads to the increase of anxiety in his relation with his wife, Bette. Bette doesn't accept the idea of her husband drinking and is fighting back persistently, believing that this will affect their son. In her attempts to solve their problem, Bette always tries to pull a third person to their dyad to form a triangle and defuse this tension. Bette first resorts to her mother in law, Soot, telling her, "I don't think Boo should drink if I'm going to have a baby" (Durang, *The Marriage* 320)." However, Soot's answer is completely fragmentary and irrelevant, saying "If it's a boy, you can name him Boo" (320).

If anxiety continues, members may pull more persons to resolve this tension, ending up with multiple triangles. Bette, for example, tries also to form another triangle by pulling her mother, Margaret, in a desperate attempt to solve her problem. She tells her "Mom, Boo drinks. And his father insulted me" (Durang, *The Marriage* 322). Her mother's answer is so passive, telling her "Betsy, dear, marriage is no bed of roses ... I'm sure it's not a serious problem, Betsy" (322). This shows that the outcome of these triangles may not always be positive ("What are the eight

interlocking concepts?"). Bette doesn't give up and tries to ask her father, Paul, who fails to take an efficient role in the triangle.

BETTE. What should I do?
PAUL. (*Angry that he can't be understood*) On#####t
ump oo
onoosns#\$. Eggh in ahm#S. [Don't jump to
conclusions. Give things time.]
MARGARET. Paul, I've asked you not to speak. We can't
understand
You. (Durang, *The Marriage* 322).

The irony in the previous lines is created when Durang introduces the only person in the play who can give sound and reasonable advice as dysfunctional due to speech impairment and consequently, no one understands him. Durang's satirical figure of Bette's father demonstrates how the American family lacks role models.

If stress is more than the three can handle, more triangles are formed by resorting to more persons who might be outside the family circle. As mentioned in Carl V. Rabstejnek's article, policemen, ministers, therapists, social workers, support groups are some examples for these parties that can form extended triangles. These outsiders get involved when the family system can't handle its stress. This is noted in the play as Bette involves Father Donnally, the priest, to help her in solving her husband's problem. Boo consents to sign a paper addressed to him by Father Donnally which guarantees that he will give up drinking in order to save his marriage, but under the effect of his father who always offers him drink, Boo fails to keep his promise. However, Bette keeps the triangle on.

Although, the triangulation process occurs to ease the tension and defuse anxiety, the persons involved in these triangles might not be sometimes suitable, which leads to more triangles. This is clearly illustrated through the role of Father Donnally, the priest, through which Durang parodies the Catholic Church. Father Donnally fails to provide Bette with sound advice when she consults him about her marital issues as he tells her: "Anna Karenina should not have left her husband nor should she have jumped in front of a train. Marriage is not a step to be taken lightly. The church does not recognize divorce" (353). Moreover,

the words of Joan, Bette's sister, about Father Donally present a ridicule of his role when she says that he "makes a better piece of bacon than he does a priest" (354). Father Donally's advice to the couple presents Durang's parody of the Catholic Church rules of divorce, saying, "Priests have it easier. If I don't like my pastor, I can apply for a transfer. If I don't like a housekeeper, I can get her fired. (*Looks disgruntled.*) But a husband and wife are stuck together. So know what you're doing when you get married" (353).

Similarly, in *Baby with the Bathwater*, the triangulation process occurs with the main goal of easing the tension between John and Helen; however, the persons involved in these triangles are not sometimes suitable, which leads to more triangles. We view how John's and Helen's main reason of great anxiety is derived from the fear of responsibility. Helen, the frustrated writer with a newly born baby, panics from new experiences. She doesn't want to take the responsibility of her household shores or her baby.

- HELEN: I want a divorce.
JOHN: What?
HELEN: You heard me. I want a divorce.
JOHN: Are you crazy? You've read the statistics on children from broken homes. Do you want to do that to our child?
HELEN: I don't feel ready for marriage, I didn't when we got married, I should have said no. (*Durang, Baby with the Bathwater 265*)

She has the conflict of loving the baby but not ready to look after it. Helen always tries to escape responsibility by divorce or by ignoring the whole world.

John, the alcoholic unemployed husband, wants to be a good father without doing any effort. As illustrated in the following dialogue, he doesn't want to find a job or share household responsibilities.

- HELEN: Oh God, toilet training. I can't fact it. We'll have to hire someone.
JOHN: We don't have money to hire anyone.
HELEN: Well, we'll have to earn the money.

JOHN: But we can't earn money. I was let go from work.
HELEN: Well, you can find another job.
JOHN: I need rest, I really don't feel able to work right now.
HELEN: John, that's not practical.
JOHN: I want to go to bed. (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 266)

John and Helen find that they need to pull a third person to their dyad to relieve this tension. In Carl V. Rabstajnek article, psychologists mention that the two persons usually avoid confrontation and involve a third person to provide 'balancing forces.' Accordingly, John and Helen decide to hire a nanny who is outside the family system. Durang is highly absurdist and satirical in his portrayal of the nanny. Through this character, Durang is reflecting the deterioration that is taking place inside the American family where the parents leave the absolute responsibility to a nanny who believes that pampering babies would spoil them. She becomes the main member in the family who is taking decisions and controlling their lives. Durang's satirical style is shown in his exaggerated presentation of the nanny and her important role to the couple as follows:

JOHN. ... I don't think this is going to work out.
HELEN. What isn't?
JOHN. Nanny.
HELEN. I think it's working out fine.
JOHN. I can't sleep three in bed.
HELEN. John, when we're rich we'll buy a big house with an extra
room for Nanny. Until then, this is fine.
(Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 271)

The above lines present an exaggerated, insane picture of the family that satirizes the new threatening family model where the nanny's sleeping place is with John and Helen. The bed is a symbol of intimacy, warmth and security and the intrusion of a stranger into their bed reflects the absence of all these aspects in their life. Although she is hired to solve

the problems, everything gets messed up. She has an affair with the husband and treats the baby in a horrific way. She yells at the baby to “SHUT UP” or throws him to the bassinet with “the look of panic in its face” (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 271) to the extent that the father thinks that the nanny has given him “heart attack” (267). When the baby cries, for example, she shouts at it or throws it into the bassinet, instead of lulling the baby, trying to make it stop crying or go to sleep. Sometimes, the parents think that the baby is silent because of being dead after terrifying him with her shouting. What she understands is to get the job done without considering how. Despite the nanny’s unprofessional performance, she is never dismissed.

After many years, the basic sides of the triangle change. John’s role as a father continues to be more unnoticeable, Helen continues adopting her irresponsible role, the nanny’s role ends and the baby grows to be the dysfunctional Daisy who faces an identity crisis. Daisy is described as “Very inconsistent. One minute catatonic, the next minute she moves like a comet” (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 284). The dysfunctional Daisy develops a state of running right out in front of buses but “usually the driver stops in time” (284). Because of Helen’s inability to look after her child and Daisy’s inability to control his depression and fits, Daisy pulls a psychiatrist to the mother-son dyad to form a triangle so as to relieve this anxiety. Durang’s parodies the institution of psychiatry through the representation of this psychiatrist. We are introduced to the psychiatrist only through his voice in the play but is never seen on the stage. This might show Durang’s opinion of psychiatrists who are cold, inconsiderate and might not always give the correct advice. The psychiatrist gives Daisy ineffective advice and this is illustrated through the psychiatrist’s advice to Daisy on how to finish his *Gulliver’s Travels* paper, saying: “In problems of this sort, it’s best to begin at the beginning, to follow through to the middle, and continue on until the ending” (293). This quote is a parody of Aristotle’s *Poetics* in which he emphasizes that a whole thing must have a beginning, a middle and an end. The parody here is used to satirize the quality of information and the help given to the patient as the psychiatrist provides Daisy with useless advice. He further loses his patience with Daisy’s problems and tells him “Please, *please*, I need a vacation” (296) and asks him to “PULL [HIMSELF] TOGETHER!” (297).

Durang’s portrayal of Daisy and his problems is also hyperbolic which is meant to continue his attack to the family institution and the failing role

of the parents. This is shown in the satiric and hyperbolic dialogue below between Daisy and his psychiatrist.

VOICE. Why did you use to wear dresses?

DAISY. Well that's how my parents dressed me. They said they

didn't know what sex I was, but it had to be one of two, so

they made a guess, and they just guessed wrong.

VOICE. Are your genitals in any way misleading?

DAISY. No, I don't believe so. I don't think my parents ever really

looked. They didn't want to intrude. It was a kind of

politeness on their part. My mother is sort of delicate, and

my father rests a lot. (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 292).

In the previous lines, Daisy justifies to the doctor why his parents haven't discovered that he is a boy and not a girl and that he is the one who finds this out when he is eleven years old. The parents' action of not checking their child's sex is quite hyperbolic and the justification given that "They didn't want to intrude" is more hyperbolic. Although the psychiatrist is presented in a satiric way to parody the institution of psychiatry, he is able to help Daisy overcome his painful experiences and continue his normal life.

Mrs. Willoughby, Daisy's school Principal, is another person drawn to Daisy's triangle to defuse anxiety but in vain. Mrs. Willoughby is a satirical character used by Durang to attack the failing educational system for its ineffective role which results in raising unqualified, unbalanced children. Durang parodies the role of the Principal through presenting this eccentric, oversexed and unfocused figure. Although Miss Pringle, Daisy's teacher, resorts to Mrs. Willoughby to defuse Daisy's anxiety, the Principal appears to be living on another planet, as shown in the lines below.

MISS PRINGLE: Well, I'm worried about Daisy. She's doing very well in track, and some days she does well in her classes, and then

some days she just stares, and then she's absent a lot.

PRINCIPAL: Yes. Uh huh. Uh huh. Yes, I see. Uh huh. Uh huh.

Go on.

MISS PRINGLE: Well, it's her summer essay, you know ... "What I Did Last Summer"?

PRINCIPAL: (*With great interest.*) What did you do?

MISS PRINGLE: No, no, no, it's the topic of the essay: what you did last summer.

PRINCIPAL: Mr. Willoughby and I went to the New Jersey seashore. He was brought up there ... Henry, sweetie, I want you to buy my husband underwear. Pink. The bikini kind. ... Thank you, Henry. (*To Pringle.*) I'm sorry, what were you saying? (*Durang, Baby with the Bathwater 289.*)

The double entendre used in the above lines emphasizes the fact that the Principal is self-centered and not focusing on her duties. Mrs. Willoughby is not concerned at all about the emotional problems Daisy's essay reflects. What she cares about is that Daisy "may be the next Virginia Woolf, the next Sylvia Plath" (*Durang, Baby with the Bathwater 291*). Miss Pringle thinks that these words mean that Daisy will commit suicide like them, but the Principal means that Daisy might be gifted like them. This double entendre reflects the Principal's indifference as she cares only for the essay and not for the emotional problems that Daisy is facing.

Self-differentiation is the second concept of Bowen's family systems theory that provides in depth understanding to the selected texts. Murray Bowen considers self-differentiation as "a cornerstone of the theory" (Bowen 362). He mentions that this concept "defines people according to the degree of *fusion*, or *differentiation*, between emotional and intellectual functioning" (362). Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen further define differentiation as "the ability to be in emotional contact with others yet still autonomous in one's emotional functioning" (145). This means that this concept reflects the person's ability in anxious situations to react in a balanced and reasonable way rather than emotionally. (Nichols, *Family Therapy 127*). Bowen describes the individual with a high differentiated

self as the one who uses his mind well to face disputes and take important decisions without being pushed by the emotions of the moment. (Nichols, *The Essentials* 71). Accordingly, these individuals who have trouble differentiating themselves from others function poorly and are “so fused that their lives are dominated by the feelings of those around them” (Goldenberg and Goldenberg 182).

In *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, the poor undifferentiated self has been manifested through the character of Soot, Boo's mother, who is always submissive and accepting Karl's abusive behavior. Soot is also developing a pseudo-self which is capable of absorbing the individuals around it. Murray Bowen clarifies that a pseudo-self is like a mask of survival which the person wears in many occasions to be able to deal with the others. In an unhealthy relationship, “two pseudo-selves will fuse into each other, one losing self to the other, who gains self” (365). This is reflected through the dyad of Karl and Soot. Karl is a poorly differentiated person who bullies and abuses his wife, trying to control the functioning of her ‘self.’ He forces her to conform to his way of thinking and feeling by controlling how she acts. He always insults and disrespects her, as shown in the lines below:

SOOT. You know, I really can't remember how
 everyone started calling me Soot. Can you,
 Karl?
KARL. Go into your dance, Soot.
SOOT. Oh, Karl. (*Laughs.*)
KARL. Go get the veils and start in. The shades are
 down.
SOOT. Karl, I don't know what you're talking about.
KARL. You're the dumbest white woman alive, I rest
 my case.

(*Soot laughs. Light change.*) (Durang, *The Marriage* 321)

The previous lines present how Durang uses understatement through Karl's insults and abusive language to his wife as a tool to create a satirical image of this dysfunctional and unhealthy relationship. The dominating, mean husband doesn't only call his wife “the dumbest white woman alive” but also a “bore” who “hasn't said one sensible thing in thirty years” (Durang, *The Marriage* 332). In the article entitled “Bowen

Theory and History”, Bowen states that dysfunction occurs in a fixed relationship where one person is always with “a gaining self” and the other is with “a losing self”. So, Soot’s submission to Karl and her acceptance to his mean treatment pushes her to become a dysfunctional spouse. After being subject to at least one time nervous breakdown, she becomes totally passive, either laughing on his insults, or pretending she doesn’t hear what he says due to her near deafness which she is happy to have.

Margaret, Bette’s mother, is also a poorly differentiated person through her domineering character and through her continuous trials to oppress her husband who stutters as a result of a stroke. Whenever he tries to talk or give advice or state his opinion, she suppresses and embarrasses him, saying, “Shut up!” (Durang, *The Marriage* 322). Although she pretends to be the beholder of everything, she never gives valuable advice or offers effective support. When her daughters are arguing and fighting with each other, she is so happy because she feels their presence with her, telling them “You’re both acting very funny” (331). She is even happy that her daughter Joan is divorced and is waiting for Bette’s divorce too so as to have all her children back. The desire for keeping all her children by her side reflects her poor differentiated self which is obsessed with domination and control. Durang also satirizes the relationship of this couple through the exaggeration in the portrayal of Margaret who always takes the leading role but gives inefficient advice and the understatement in the portrayal of Paul who is not understood by anyone because of his stuttering though he is the only wise person. Accordingly, Durang’s satire is quite illustrated when readers find Paul, the only wise person, impaired and, consequently, dysfunctional.

In *Baby with the Bathwater*, Helen and John are associated with low self-differentiation which appears through their inability to take sound decisions or live to their responsibilities. According to Murray Bowen, a well differentiated person takes important decisions related to family based on facts and not emotions (Bowen 362). In the following dialogue the parents are setting future plans for the child; however, the mother’s reaction reflects the panic to hold any responsibility

JOHN. We were making plans. The child’s schooling,
what
playground to take it to, whether to let it play
with toy

guns, how to toilet train it.
HELEN. Oh God, toilet training, I can't face it. We'll
have to hire
someone.
HELEN. ... It won't stop that noise.
(*To baby.*) Shut up, baby. Shut up. Oh God,
please help us.
Please make the baby stop.
NANNY. Hello, I'm Nanny.
HELEN. Oh thank goodness you've come. Please make it
stop crying. (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater*
267)

Durang in the previous lines presents a satirical dialogue through the exaggerated panic of the mother as a reaction to the expected responsibilities towards their baby. With any new entitled responsibility, the main reaction is the mother's panic and rash decisions and the father's withdrawal. The hyperbolic reaction of the mother is used by Durang to satirize the deteriorating role of the mother and father in the family during late 20th century. John is also a poor differentiated character who doesn't take decisions and likes the idea of staying at home doing nothing. Helen shouts at him saying, "John, live up to your responsibilities" (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 266).

Durang's satire is also presented through the hyperbolic portrayal of the figure of the nanny. Although the nanny is taking all the decisions and managing the house, she is still a poor differentiated self because she is incapable of taking sound and appropriate decisions. Durang continues satirizing the dysfunction of this nuclear family through the character of the couple's son, Daisy, who faces difficulty in identifying his sex until he is eleven years old, through a medical book. G. Pirooz Sholevar states that differentiation and maturity are accomplished when a person can "define himself" within the context of the family relationship. The failure of this process occurs in the cases of "undifferentiation" and "cut-off" phenomenon" ("Family Theory" 12). Murray Bowen believes that the tension resulting from anxiety leads to dysfunction or sickness. According to Jean Blackburn, "The symptoms are manifested by physical illness, by emotional dysfunction, social illness characterized by impulsiveness, withdrawal or social misbehavior in a spouse; or by

emotional or behavioral dysfunction in a child.” That is the reason why Daisy grows to be depressed, psychologically ill and sexually obsessed.

Family projection process is the third concept of Bowen’s theory that traces the effect of anxiety in the couple’s relation on the following generation. Jenny Brown in her article states the difference between “triangles” and “self-differentiation” on one hand and “family projection process” on the other. The first two concepts mainly focus on the anxiety in a nuclear family, while family projection process focuses on the impact of the couple’s relation on their children (96). This process shows how the child is deeply affected and develops symptoms as a result of being influenced by the anxiety governing the parents’ relation.

In *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, Bette longs for a tribe of children, but it is her RH incompatibility that kills all her babies except for Matt, her only surviving son. Despite this fact, she continues to get pregnant and insists on carrying them till delivery time, witnessing them as corpses at the end. These continuous failures along with Boo’s failing to quit drinking have pushed her to smother Matt with affection as a projection of her previous stillbirths in an attempt to stabilize their anxiety. She has been overprotective, trying to “freeze [him] in childhood by continuing to call him by his nickname, Skippy, even after he’s gone on to graduate school” (Vineberg 25). According to the article “Murray Bowen’s Insights into Family Dynamics,” undifferentiation and anxiety are two factors that occur during the process of pulling the child to the triangle, which will be consequently transmitted to him and result in having a psychologically impaired dysfunctional child. Matt, in *The Marriage of Bette and Boo*, confesses and admits that his mother is “a terrible, unending nag” and “neurotic” (333). Matt’s mother has transmitted her emotional problems to him and always overpressures him by her continuous expectations of him.

In the following lines, Durang satirizes the mother-son relationship through Bette’s hyperbolic hysterical conversations which always put Matt under continuous pressure.

Bette to Matt: How many days can you stay?

Matt: I have to get back tomorrow. ...

Bette: You never stay long. I don’t have much company, you know. And Polly Lydstone’s son goes to her house for dinner twice a week, and

- her daughter Mary gave up her apartment and lives at home...
- Matt: And some boy from Pingry School came home after class and shot both his parents. So what?
...
- Bette: You're the only one of my children that lived. You should
see me more often. ...
- Bette: Your father's gone away. All the babies are dead. You're the only thing of value left in my life, Skippy.
- Matt: (With growing anger.) Why do you call me Skippy? Why
don't you call me Matt? (Durang, *The Marriage* 363).

Durang's satirical approach in exposing this relation is observed in Matt's imaginary conversation with his mother, Bette. Matt makes up a complete reasonable dialogue with his mother because he can't achieve this in reality.

- MATT. (To audience.) I'm afraid I've made that conversation up
totally.
(*They start the scene over.*)
- BETTE. Hello, Skippy, dear. I made steak for you, and mashed potatoes and peas and cake. You know, you're the only one of my children that lived. How long can you stay?
- MATT. Gee, I don't know. Uh, a couple of days. Three years. Only
ten minutes, my car's double parked. I could stay eight
years if I can go away during the summer. Gee. I don't
know.
Lights change. (Durang, *The Marriage* 343)

The irony used in the lines above shows how imagination becomes the only means for reason in this insane relation. It is really embarrassing for

Matt when he confesses to the audience that he has totally made this conversation up. Matt's behavior is explained by Daniel Papero who says that "The child in this position develops a heightened sensitivity to emotional forces in the family and particularly to anxiety in the mother" (56).

In the article "What Are the Eight Interlocking Concepts of Bowen's Family Systems Theory?" experienced Bowen family systems consultants state that when anxiety emerging from the issues between the father and the mother is resolved, there will be improvement in the child's functioning. This is clear when Matt confesses to his grandfather that he is relieved after his parents' divorce as they were always fighting. Matt tells Paul: "I was glad when they separated. The arguing got on my nerves a lot. I'd hear it in my ear even when they weren't talking" ((Durang, *The Marriage* 357).

Family projection process is clearly traced in *Baby with the Bathwater* through Daisy's character. The play provides an evidence on how dysfunctional parents raise a dysfunctional child, as shown in Daisy's conversation with the psychiatrist about his sex. Although Daisy is a boy, he is dressed as a girl, named as a girl and treated as a girl. This eccentric situation is justified by Daisy as follows:

DAISY. When I was eleven, I came across this medical book that had pictures in it, and I realized I looked more like a boy than a girl, but my mother had always wanted a girl or a best-seller, and I didn't want to disappoint her. But then someday, I don't know what gets into me, I would just feel like striking out at them. So I'd wait till she was having one of her crying fits, and I took the book to her-I was twelve now-and I said, 'Have you ever seen this book? Are you totally insane? Why have you named me Daisy? Everyone else has always said I was a boy, what the matter with you?' and she kept crying ... and then she said, 'I want to die'; and then she said, 'perhaps you're a boy, but we don't want to jump to any hasty conclusions,' so why don't we just wait, and we'd see if I menstruated or not. And I asked her what that word meant, and she slapped me and washed my mouth out with soap. Then she apologized and hugged me, and said she was a bad

mother. Then she washed her mouth out with soap. Then she tied me to the kitchen table and turned on all the gas jets, and said it would be just a little while longer for the bot of us. Then my father came home and he turned off the gas jets and untied me. Then when he asked if dinner was ready, she lay on the kitchen floor and wouldn't move and he said, I guess not, and then he sort of crouched next to the refrigerator and tried to read a book, but I don't think he was really reading, because he never turned any of the pages. ((Durang, *The Marriage* 292-3)

As shown in the previous lines, the exaggerated details about this family create bitter satire that reflects Durang's loss of faith in the family institution. Unfortunately, the insanity of the irresponsible couple results in having a confused individual, suffering from anxiety and inability to identify his sex. This is further justified by Murray Bowen as he says, "The parents' fears and perceptions so shape the child's development and behavior that he grows to embody their fears and perceptions" (qtd in "Family Projection Process").

It is mentioned in "Family Projection Process," on Bowen's Center Website, that this family projection process operates through three phases. The first phase is when "the parents focus on a child out of fear that something is wrong with the child." Since the first page of the play, Helen's paranoia about having a newly born baby is clear. She panics that she might raise up a crazy child, telling John firmly, "I just don't want to make the child insane" (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 264). Being afraid to raise an insane child, the couple end up hiring a nanny who turns out to be an insane, monstrous creature. Durang through this ironic situation of hiring an insane nanny for fear of raising an insane child satirizes the deterioration of roles in the American family as follows:

JOHN: Well maybe that's too strong. But I think you're too rough with baby. I mean, you just threw it into the bassinet.
NANNY: Do you hear it crying?
JOHN: No, but maybe it's fainted or something.
NANNY: It's just resting.

- JOHN: You keep saying that, but I think you have it fainting. And it has this look of panic on its face.
- NANNY: Look, don't tell me how to handle children. I got it down. (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 271)

The nanny deals with the baby in a rough way. To keep him quiet, she either throws it to the bassinet or gives him a rattle made of asbestos, lead and Red Dye No. 2. The irony in the nanny's words "it's just resting" foreshadows Daisy's future dysfunction.

In the second phase of the projection process, "the parent interprets the child's behavior as confirming the fear" and this is what happens when John and Helen suspect that the child is pretending to smile due to insanity.

- BOTH: (*Angry.*) SMILE! SMILE! SMILE! SMILE!
- HELEN. (*Pleased.*) Oh, John, look, it's smiling.
- JOHN. That's right, baby.
- HELEN. Do you think it's just pretending to smile to humor us?
- JOHN. I think it's too young to be that complicated.
- HELEN. Yes, but why would it smile at us when we shouted at it?
- JOHN. I don't know. Maybe it's insane. (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 281)

Being raised by disturbed parents and a monstrous nanny who believe that the child is insane result in having the dysfunctional Daisy. This leads to the third phase of the projection process and in this last phase, the parent treats the child as if something is really wrong with the child after unintentionally driving him/her to dysfunction and craziness. This is shown as Helen describes Daisy as "Very inconsistent. One minute catatonic, the next minute she moves like a comet" (Durang, *Baby with the Bathwater* 284). Through the examples mentioned above, it is quite noted that family projection process is a combination of three phases that end in having a dysfunctional child.

The paper has presented clear answers to the addressed research questions through application and analysis. First, Durang's two satirical plays have provided a rich medium for the application of Murray

Bowen's family systems theory. The extensive application of Bowen's three concepts has proven that they are closely interconnected. The study has shown that families in both plays have followed Bowen's behavioral pattern of triangulation by pulling a third person to defuse anxiety; however, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* have presented the best couple of Bette and Boo in triangulating people because of the numerous examples of triangles that the text offered. On another level, the nanny in *Baby with the Bathwater* has presented the best example for the third person pulled to a triangle through her insane monstrous attitude and through Durang's outrageous satirical portrayal. Furthermore, Durang through his use of understatement, overstatement and irony has presented characters with poor self-differentiation to satirize the family institution and highlight its follies boldly. Relatively, Karl and Soot have epitomized this example through 'the gaining self' and 'the losing self' model. It is worth noting here that the characters of both Matt and Daisy in each play have presented an effective embodiment of family projection, highlighting its impact on the following generation. After this quick comparison, it is concluded that *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* has presented a richer medium for application than *Baby with the Bathwater* as it involved several families that belong to different generations, offering a wider range of examples and analysis. However, the catastrophic consequences epitomized by Daisy as a result of the insane treatment of the father, mother and nanny have made the text able to compete with the other play.

In conclusion, this interdisciplinary research has proven the great potential of psychological theories in examining literary works. Bowen's family systems theory has provided a perceptive reading of Durang's two plays, *The Marriage of Bette and Boo* and *Baby with the Bathwater* within a psychological approach. The exaggerated, nonsensical, ambiguous nature of Durang's plays makes it a suitable choice for applying this theory which is testing dysfunction and anxiety in each corner in the chosen plays. The most applicable three out of the eight concepts of Bowen's theory are used in this study to guarantee the maximum relevance of the theory to the texts within the required range of research. The study has traced the triangulation process in the American family in both plays, highlighting the reasons and the mechanism of such process and showing that it doesn't necessarily lead to anxiety relief. The paper has then examined how the poor self-differentiated characters negatively affect each other and their children, leading to dysfunction in

the family. The paper has finally traced the family projection process resulting from low self-differentiation, showing that dysfunctional parents who suffer from anxiety transmit such anxiety to their child which results in having another dysfunctional generation. The study has also illustrated through the interlocking concepts of Bowen's theory how the family system is intertwined and that the dysfunction in one member leads to the instability of this system. Finally, due to the great potential of this theory to decipher and examine literary texts, it is quite recommended that another research could be conducted, using other concepts of this theory, such as 'nuclear family emotional system' on another literary genre.

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