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**EXPLORING THE EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS: A
BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON
EM AND THE BIG HOOM**

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Abstract:

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* offers a touching exploration of a family navigating the tumultuous waters of mental illness. This study analyzes the novel through the lens of Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory, examining how the interconnectedness of family members' behaviors and emotional responses contribute to the overall family dynamic. Specifically, the research investigates how Bowen's concepts of differentiation of self, triangulation, emotional cutoff, and family projection process manifest in the characters' interactions and relationships, concerning the mother's bipolar disorder. By applying this theoretical framework, the researcher aims to illuminate the complex interplay between individual experiences and the larger family system in shaping the Mendes family's emotional well-being and coping mechanisms.

Keywords: Family Systems Theory, Mental illness, Differentiation, Triangulation, Family Dynamics, Emotional cutoff, Family Projection Process, etc.

Introduction:

The emotional dysfunction of an individual disturbs all of that person's relationship systems, especially the family system (Bowen, 1978). An evaluation of the child and adolescent necessitates an assessment of the familial framework in which they exist. Murray Bowen posited that the fundamental motivators behind all human actions stem from the interplay among family members, as they seek equilibrium between the need for individuality and the need for connection (Wylie, 1990). Caruth's theory of "the unclaimed experience" explores the importance of language in expressing traumatic occurrences (Caruth, 1996). It highlights the relationship between language, childhood emotional deprivation, and mental illness within family systems,



which can help understand human behavior between families how they affect people, and the psychological consequences of very distressing events. The Bowen Family Systems Theory model offers a framework for understanding the individual's role within the family unit. The objective of this paper is to elucidate the fundamental principles of the Bowen Family Systems Theory. It aims to equip practitioners and other professionals working with children or adolescents who are symptomatic patients with a framework to analyze the roles of family members, their patterns of communication, and the structure of the family in therapy. Additionally, it seeks to demonstrate the practical application of these concepts to a particular family. Family life is an intricate network of connections, reactions to stress, and distinct personalities. Analyzing these aspects enables researchers and practitioners to comprehend the functioning of the study when Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory explores family dynamics. The family system influences family members' behaviors, feelings, and responses, according to this notion.

Bowen highlights the significance of comprehending the family as a cohesive unit and how the functioning of each individual is not only shaped by their internal factors but also by the dynamics of the entire family. According to this theory, family dynamics, rather than just internal factors or individual pathology, frequently play a role in explaining why people experience emotional and mental health problems. David Paul and Gulsum Alan state in their paper "Problematizing the Postmodern Condition in *Em and the Big Hoom* that Jerry Pinto's "Em and the Big Hoom" deals with postmodernism. It examines characters' psyches and postmodern themes, including fragmentation, non-linearity, and fun. The work represents current society's intricacies, according to the piece, which proceeds by exploring modernism and postmodernism." (Paul, 2022). Pinto's portrayal of the character's issues with emotional neglect and bipolar illness aligns with Bowen's concept of scattered anxiety, which is a result of damaging patterns of interaction within the family. Through the application of Bowen's Family Systems Theory, readers can obtain insights into how the dynamics of the family and the emotional processes of the characters in the story affect their experiences.

Jerry Pinto eloquently shows a family coping with the terrible consequences of mental illness, notably the mother's bipolar condition. The novel presents a comprehensive analysis of the Mendes family's hardships, stressing the delicate interaction between individual experiences and the entire family dynamic. This research uses Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory (Haefner, 2014; Papero, 2016) to examine the intricacies of the Mendes family interactions and emotional reactions. Bowen's theory emphasizes the interconnection of family members and contends that individual behaviors are better understood within the wider family system (Mahmudah et al., 2024). Bowen's framework contains key concepts such as differentiation of self (Atkinson, 1982), triangulation (Atkinson, 1982), emotional cutoff (Atkinson, 1982), and family projection process (Atkinson, 1982), which provide a framework for understanding the characters' interactions and coping mechanisms.

Jerry Pinto's *Em and the Big Hoom* is a moving look at a family dealing with mental illness and the complexity of emotions and relationships. Set in Mumbai, India, the narrative covers the Mendes family's existence, with a special emphasis on the influence of the mother, "Em," and her problems with bipolar illness on the family dynamic. The Mendes family's representation allows for an analysis of how individual challenges connect with the larger family system, providing a unique chance to analyze these dynamics using Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory. *Em and the Big Hoom* not only depicts these interactions but also provides a sophisticated view of the postmodern situation. The novel's investigation of fractured identities,



fluctuating relationships, and the quest for meaning in a chaotic environment is consistent with postmodernist ideas. This research examines the Mendes family using Bowen's framework to better understand how their experiences mirror and perhaps challenge the postmodern situation. Therefore, this study tries to answer the following question: How does Bowen's Family Systems Theory shed light on the complex dynamics and individual experiences of the Mendes family in *Em and the Big Hoom*, and how do these dynamics interact with postmodern challenges?

The Concept and Historical Perspective of “Bowen Theory”:

Murray Bowen, the founder of Bowen Family Systems Theory, pioneered family psychotherapy. His study at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas (1946–1954) focused on the complex interactions between schizophrenia patients and their mothers. He studied at the National Institute of Mental Health (1954–1959), where the patient and family lived. The Interpersonal dynamics in these homes led to family theory. He ended the live-in research at NIMH and focused on family systems theory, concluding that “it was apparent that all families were similar” (Bowen, 1978). While at Georgetown University Medical Centre, Bowen refined his idea. He also founded the Georgetown Family Centre in 1975. His transgenerational perspective held that modern family forms and concerns recurred. Every family has an emotional system that fights stress and maintains stability. The Bowen Centre for the Study of the Family at Georgetown University develops his work. Families establish connections with each other via emotional fusion, where there is a significant exchange of individuality as individuals’ thoughts, emotions, and actions become intimately interconnected. Consequently, emotions are often presumed or communicated among family members as a result of automatic reactions that have formed a habitual pattern within the family unit. The main objectives of Bowenian theory in therapy are to decrease the client's persistent worry that underlies their symptoms and to help individual family members begin the lifetime process of distancing themselves from the universal forces of emotional connectedness (Bowen, 1978). Individuals from families characterized by high levels of emotional cohesion often endure persistent anxiety, which is believed to come from a disruption in the relational dynamics whereas, Bowen's theory incorporates a set of eight interconnected states that delineate the inherent and persistent emotional anxiety that exists throughout family interactions. It claims that chronic anxiety serves as the root cause of dysfunction within families. The basic idea of this theory is the differentiation of self and emotional fusion, which pertains to an individual's capacity to separate themselves from their original family on both personal and intellectual grounds (Bowen, 1978). Bowen suggested that there is a correlation between the amount of chronic anxiety and the level of eight interconnected elements that influence family functioning.

Applying Bowen's Family theory in the novel *Em and the Big Hoom*:

Jerry Pinto's book *Em and the Big Hoom* provides a captivating depiction of family dynamics and interconnections, making it a perfect text for examination using Murray Bowen's theory. Bowen's theory offers a thorough structure for comprehending the complex interconnections and emotional dynamics inside families. *Em and the Big Hoom* gives a fertile background for examining these notions in a realistic scenario. Through a closer reading of the book, we can examine how the larger family structure influences the characters’ behaviors and emotional responses, as well as how the emotional dynamics of the family affect each person's mental health and well-being. Through certain episodes, we can reveal how the book effectively demonstrates the concepts of



Bowen's Family Systems Theory and offers significant insights into the intricate dynamics of emotions, behaviors, and connections within a family. In chapter 4, "The Prayers of Mentals," quotes "If there was one thing I feared as I was growing up...No, that's stupid. I feared hundreds of things: the dark, the death of my father, the possibility that I might rejoice at the death of my mother, sums involving vernier calipers, groups of schoolboys with nothing much to do, death of drowning" (Pinto, 2013). Pinto aims to evoke a feeling of intricacy and fragility around their apprehensions from infancy. First line: Perhaps attempting to downplay their fears, Pinto begins by mentioning a solitary childhood anxiety. With a relatively brief "That's stupid," he brushes off this concept, alluding to a more profound emotional reality they might be reluctant to share. In line two, the statement "I feared hundreds of things" exposes the reality and shows how extensive the fears were. Pinto then delves into particular instances, illustrating a childhood riddled with everyday anxieties such as drowning and darkness.

Additional personal concerns emerge as well, alluded to both a tangled relationship with his mother and a battle at school (sums involving vernier calipers). Fear of social circumstances also exists, with "groups of schoolboys with nothing much to do" implying bullying or ostracism. Overall, the sentence is loaded with honesty and a hint of self-deprecation ("That is stupid"). It depicts a childhood that was both typical and unique in several ways. Pinto's writing style connects the reader to their fragility and the nuances of childhood worries. This analysis examines the novel and its portrayal of the postmodern state. It specifically focuses on how the book portrays and questions this condition by using family systems theory. By doing so, it provides insights into the complexities of human experiences within the family setting. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory explores the complex dynamics and interconnections within families, highlighting the interdependent nature of people and the influence of the broader family system on their actions and feelings. Jerry Pinto adeptly portrays these ideas in *Em and the Big Hoom* enabling readers to see the intricacies of familial relationships and the significant impact of the family structure on personal encounters. It investigates how Bowen's Family Systems Theory sheds insight on the impaired patterns in the novel while also acknowledging the difficulties in connecting a notion from psychology to a literary work.

Dr. Murray Bowen established the Bowen family systems theory, which provides unique insights into the dynamics of family connections and how they impact our lives. Families are complicated systems in which individuals' lives intersect and impact one another. Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory provides a useful perspective for examining these processes. Developed in the mid-twentieth century, it claims that families work as emotional units, with one member's behavior eventually affecting the others (Bowen, 1978). This significant theory examines the relationship between family structures, emotional fusion, and the idea of distinction. Individuals who understand and use the Bowen family systems theory concepts may build emotional differences, foster better relationships, and negotiate difficult dynamics with more clarity and resilience. In this research, we explain the fundamentals of Bowen's theory and show how it may alter and deepen relationships.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory through *Em and the Big Hoom*:

1. *Differentiation of Self: A Core Concept in Bowen's Theory*

Murray Bowen's Family Systems Theory focuses on self-differentiation. This relates to a person's capacity to properly regulate their emotions, keep healthy boundaries within the family structure, and think independently. A well-differentiated individual can express themselves effectively and



negotiate conflict productively without overreacting to the emotions of others (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Applying it to Jerry Pinto's novel, *Em and the Big Hoom*, provides a rich opportunity to analyze the concept of differentiation of self within a dysfunctional family. Examining the characters' communication methods closely may uncover a lack of difference. The Mendes family members struggle to maintain their identities amidst the emotional turmoil caused by Em's bipolar disorder. The narrator, for instance, often describes feeling engulfed by his mother's emotions, his sense of self blurring with hers. He grapples with defining his identity separate from his role as Em's son and the family's chronic anxiety (Papero, 2016). Instances where he seeks solace in writing or intellectual pursuits could be interpreted as attempts to differentiate, creating a space for himself outside the family's emotional epicenter. Similarly, the father, while deeply involved in Em's care, demonstrates moments of differentiation by engaging in his work and maintaining some semblance of normalcy amidst the chaos. However, even these attempts at differentiation are often fragile, as the family's interconnectedness (Chesson, 2023) constantly pulls them back into the shared emotional sphere (Süloğlu & Güler, 2021).

Em's Emotional Expression: The novel implies that Em has difficulties articulating her feelings as a result of familial tensions. Identify situations in which Em deliberately refrains from expressing her own emotions, maybe suppressing them to avoid confrontation or disapproval from her family. Textual evidence of Em engaging in passive-aggressive behavior or emotional retreat may suggest difficulties with distinction. In the scene when the narrator, Granny, and Em are sipping tea and conversing, Em suddenly asks for a red pen and then begins to question the poison in her tea. When Em was deep in concentration, Granny informed her, "No one wants to poison her," but Em made a dismissive gesture, causing Granny's face to collapse. Em states, "He got you in the gut, you old hound dog" (Pinto 2013), and Em sprayed them both with tea. Pinto uses the tea scene to highlight Em's mental turmoil (paranoia, outbursts) and the pressure on the family (distrust, lack of connection). It's a plea for assistance from a distressed person. On the other hand, is "Big Hoom" suppressing his emotions to preserve familial stability? Consider if he deliberately avoids acknowledging Em's mental illness or his fears, giving more importance to maintaining a false appearance of normality than being emotionally truthful. This indicates a deficiency in distinction, where he places a higher importance on preserving harmony than engaging in transparent communication. Therefore, this impact of low differentiation and its consequences in the Mendes family, within the framework of Bowen's theory, is that within families there is a lack of distinction, which significantly affects the emotional well-being of the characters and their capacity to establish healthy connections. This section examines two primary ramifications of poor differentiation where emotional outbursts and challenges in establishing and maintaining external connections.

2. Triangulation:

In Bowen's opinion, when a third party gets involved in a dispute between two people who are blood relatives, this phenomenon occurs. This gives rise to detrimental dynamics in which the third party may be unfairly blamed, experience coercion to choose sides or be subjected to the emotional manipulation of the novel. Search for occurrences in which their daughter Susan and an unidentified narrator are caught in their mother's bipolar disorder, resulting in episodes of lunacy and acts of violence. Perhaps one individual wants to express affection, provide assistance, and provide emotional support, while the other one opposes these efforts, resulting in a conflict for dominance. The presence of their father, Big Hoom, who refrained from putting Em in a mental



institution due to his loyalty, created a problematic situation where he was alone and responsible for handling Em. Triangulation may exacerbate feelings of insecurity and create a sense of divided loyalty within families.

Em's fluctuating emotional states frequently lead to triangulated relationships within the family. For instance, during periods of Em's mania, the narrator and his sister might ally, finding comfort and support in each other while feeling distanced from their parents. Conversely, when Em is depressed, the children might become triangulated with their father, each vying for his attention and support. These shifting alliances and conflicts highlight the dynamic nature of triangulation within the family system (Lerner, 1988), responds to the ever-changing emotional landscape.

3. Emotional cutoff:

Bowen's perspective "Emotional cutoff refers to a defensive strategy in which a member of a family deliberately distances themselves emotionally from another member to avoid experiencing extreme emotions or conflicts". These manifestations might include physical separation, emotional aloofness, or a deficiency in communication. Although emotional cutoffs may provide a short respite, they eventually impede closeness and connection within the family. Bowen's theory is also applicable to comprehending emotional processes throughout society as a whole. Societies characterized by elevated emotional reactivity may have difficulties managing social conflict and exhibit a deficiency in empathy. While not often apparent, emotional cutoff may be seen in how characters handle their emotional reactions to Em's sickness. At times, the father looks emotionally aloof, maybe as a coping mechanism for Em's severe illness. This distance, however, may affect his connection with his children, who may interpret his emotional absence as a lack of support (Atkinson, 1982). Furthermore, the narrator's emphasis on his academic activities might be seen as a type of emotional isolation, providing him with a feeling of control and stability in the face of his family's emotional turmoil (Atkinson, 1982).

4. Family Projection Process:

Bowen's View of this concept refers to the innate inclination of family members to unconsciously transfer their unsolved problems onto others. For instance, a parent may transfer their fears onto their child, causing the youngster to see themselves as accountable for the parent's emotional condition. In *The Em and the Big Hoom*, the character Em tends to transfer her fears or insecurities onto others. Em may be projecting her unrealized aspirations onto her children, resulting in them experiencing a sense of pressure. The family projection process elucidates recurring behavioral patterns and challenges in establishing a cohesive sense of self, as seen in the writings of the Pinto family. The story suggests that unresolved emotional patterns are passed down through generations of the Mendes family. Em's family history, although not thoroughly recounted, reveals a background of emotional difficulties that may have contributed to her illness and impacted the family's present relationships. Exploring situations in which historical family patterns are referenced or replicated in current interactions may provide light on the family projection process (Mahmudah et al., 2024). For example, the novel implies that Em's family has a history of mental illness or emotional suppression, linking these past patterns to contemporary family challenges might indicate the transfer of unresolved emotional issues between generations.



Discussion:

Bowen's concepts provide a framework for understanding the complex dynamics within the Mendes family. As previously discussed, differentiation of self becomes a central struggle for each member, particularly the narrator, as they attempt to define their individuality amidst the intense emotional climate (Chesson, 2023). Em's bipolar disorder disrupts the equilibrium of the family, creating a system characterized by fluctuating levels of differentiation, often hindering individual autonomy. Triangulation emerges as a recurring pattern, with shifting alliances and conflicts arising in response to Em's emotional state. This discussion examines the findings of the research question and examines how Bowen's theory illuminates character behaviors and emotional responses in *Em and the Big Hoom* (Pinto, 2013). The children's relationships with each other and their father are constantly recalibrated as they navigate the emotional currents of the family system. Emotional cutoff, as discussed previously, manifests in various forms, from the father's potential emotional distancing (Atkinson, 1982) to the narrator's intellectual pursuits (Chambers, 2009). These coping mechanisms, while offering temporary respite, ultimately impact the characters' abilities to form healthy, interconnected relationships (Papero, 2016). The family projection process, though subtly depicted, hints at intergenerational transmission of emotional patterns, suggesting that Em's struggles might be rooted in unresolved family issues from previous generations (Mahmudah et al., 2024).

Bowen's theory was developed primarily for clinical settings, so it is important to exercise caution when applying it to a fictional story because the stylized and symbolic nature of literary representation differs from the complexities of real-life family interactions. Although the theory offers valuable insights, it may not fully capture the nuances of the Mendes family's experiences; for example, the socio-cultural context of Mumbai, the individual personalities outside of their familial roles, and the internal experiences of the characters, particularly Em, is rich areas that Bowen's theory might not fully addresses. But, the novel's exploration of themes like love, resilience, and the power of narrative adds layers of meaning that go beyond a purely systemic analysis. The novel's depiction of family relationships provides insightful information about the difficulties and resiliency faced by families dealing with mental illness. It makes the difficulties more relatable by emphasizing the emotional toll on everyone involved, not just the person with the diagnosis. The Mendes family's experience serves as a reminder of how crucial empathy, comprehension, and candid communication are when dealing with such challenges. It also implies that even in extreme misfortune, resilience may arise from common experiences and the lasting ties of family.

Conclusion

To conclude, through the perspective of Bowen Family Systems Theory, this research analyzed the family dynamics in *Em and the Big Hoom*, demonstrating how the theory sheds light on the Mendes family's relationship patterns and character behaviors. To comprehend the family's battles with mental illness, the analysis emphasized the ideas of emotional cutoff, triangulation, differentiation of self, and family projection process. But there was also recognition of the drawbacks of using a theoretical framework to analyze a story. Subsequent investigations may delve deeper into the connections between literature, family systems theory, and mental health. A more comprehensive understanding of various family dynamics and coping strategies may result from comparative analyses of various literary works that show families dealing with mental illness. Understanding how these elements interact with family systems may also be improved by



examining the cultural settings and literary depictions of mental illness. (Jakimowicz et al., 2021) suggest that the integration of viewpoints from literary theory and narrative analysis may improve the understanding of family dynamics and provide a more complex understanding of the human experience of mental illness in the family setting.

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