

**“Representation of Self of Bowenian Progeny Through Stemma in
M.L Steadman’s *Light Between the Oceans* and Jodi Picoult’s
Leaving Time”**

Honoureen Beatrice Gamble

Ph. D. Scholar

P.G & Research Department of English

St. Joseph’s College (A)

Tiruchirappalli, India

Abstract

This paper joins a vibrant combination in Literature, about the application of a non-literary theory on literary texts. It explores how literature is multi-dimensional and consciously present in non-literary theories to a great extent. Collectively, one among them is The Bowen’s Theory of Family System article by an American Psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen. The question that this dissertation explicits is, How the Bowen’s progeny of self is identified through stemma? What is the progeny of self? And how stemma inter-relates to it? In order to explore these questions, this research paper broadens the very term ‘self, analyzing it in different arenas of literature and psychology. While the research dealt in the chapters focus on systematic nuances of Bowen’s Theory, followed by four vital concepts of the theory, applied on the literary novels by M.L. Stedman and Jodi Picoult. By focusing on this progeny of self in literature and psychology this paper aims to create a sense of how ‘A Family Self’ is identified through the application of Bowen’s Theory. Finally it depicts how stemma acts as a relational self in the two novels, which bears connection to the Family Theory.

Introduction

The Bowen's Family System Theory was developed by Dr. Murray Bowen (1913-1919), a pioneer of family psychotherapy. Bowen discovered that each family has an emotional system, which seeks way to reduce tension and maintain stability. The goal of Bowen's Family Therapy was to access the family members, move towards differentiation of self, rather than emotional reactivity. The theory in simpler terms talk about the growth of human species bond within a unit called family. The significance of how the self of a family is governed through relationships of emotions and anxiety, which is showcased in this research. Under study Dr. Murray Bowen denotes that Family Theory governs human relationships. These statements were proved right when the 'Self' of a family were discovered.

The 'Self' here explains how it is being victimised or differentiated by positive or negative emotions. The knowledge derived here describes how the emotional system operates in one's family, work and social systems. In concern with family, connections and disconnections explains its role within relationships in life. Family members profoundly affect each other's thoughts, feelings and actions that it creates an emotional skin rather than a real 'Self'. People solicit each other's attention, support and react to basic needs, expectations and distress under the emotional skin. This connectedness and reactivity forms the human behaviour, which test the function of family self.

The goal of Bowen's Theory is to reduce chronic anxiety within relationships and to test the dysfunctionality in them. At first, the 'Self' in this context questions how it facilitates an awareness of emotions, warns the opponent not to fall a pray to reactivity. Secondly, the 'Self' faces increased levels of differentiation. Thirdly, focus is made on an individual, rather than collective being. These solutions by Bowen promote Family Theory as "life cycles of facing more than one self in a family" (Carter and Mc Goldrick 100).

According to Bowen, the degree of anxiety and differentiation transform the self of a family. Bowen theorised that "individual self reacts to the other sectors or group and society as a whole" (Bowen 385). These form the variables to experiment a family self by testing togetherness and individuality, a member holds within his/her family. Bowen's theory re-researched in this paper explains how the two variables can be equally balanced in order to become one self from many selves in relationships. It also showcases excessive levels of togetherness, results in fusion of relationships, as too much individuality results in isolation.

Bowenian therapists Guerin and Fogarty call this a symptom of low differentiation or over adaptiveness which many people face. The evidences of the theory explicit that it is the past opinion of the natural system of life rather than the family alone. This opinion of the past foregrounds treating the 'Self' as a 'Stemma" a whole and its relation to its members. The word 'Stemma" clearly indicates

the inter-connectedness of the past experiences lived by the individual self through behaviour and feelings. Through Bowen's Theory the self is identified through stemma consciously and unconsciously by the mind. This mind denotes the involvement of the researcher in literature, the stemmatic elements branches out a new phase of literary criticism, bridging the conscious and unconscious mind as one self.

This 'Self' forms the original side of the author with the interpreter as the counterpart 'Stemma' stands unique as it boldly asserts that this self in the authors live anxiously as characters of their work and Bowenian Theory acts as a symbolic action. In order to rectify this anxiety and loss of self, stemma is functioned through Bowen Theory as an applied treatment. Bowen's theory depicts the narration of telling its 'story' from one generation to this generation which is showcased in the literary texts by M.L. Stedman and Jodi Picoult.

The 'Progeny of Self' is identified as, fortunately the two authors share the same image of what family bears through the theme of love, grief, abandonment, and triangled relationships. These relationships are balanced with the efforts of Dr. Murray Bowen's non-literary theory that influences literature in the two novels, *The Light Between Oceans* by M. L. Stedman and *Leaving Time* by Jodi Picoult. In mere observation the concepts of Bowen Theory are categorised into eight kinds, but this paper details only the four vital concepts which is unconsciously observed in the novels *The Light Between Oceans* and *Leaving Time*.

- Triangles
- Differentiation of Self
- Nuclear Family System
- Family Projection Process
- Multi-generational Transmission Process
- Emotional Cut-off
- Sibling Position
- Societal Regression

Triangles: The basic building block of the family, according to Bowen's Theory. This emotional triangle signifies either two or three persons. Michael Kerr a family therapist of family theory, states "triangles are another example of family system which reflects natural phenomena" (Kerr 120). Triangles are not only from one culture to another or one gender to the other, but they are universally observed in all relationships. The triangulating aspect of Bowen's Theory forms the sub-category to the emotional system.

Bowen Theory suggests a few questions to ask when addressing an emotional triangle. First, where is the triangle? Second, what are the dynamics? If one is 'triangled' how does one become

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

UGC Approved

more emotionally neutral while staying in touch with the other two participants? Bowen states, triangles tend to repeat themselves across generations. When one member of a triangle departs or dies, a similar person draws into the family a different role, a rescuer, victim, villain and martyr. For example, a common family in the novel *The Light Between Oceans* by M.L. Stedman fore shadows the concept of triangulation between the characters forming family dyads.

Triangulation can happen in any type of relationship. It can lead to crisis and result in mental depression on the flip side, it also carries a positive impact in being a source of help in unstable relationships. Triangulation sub-branches itself through Bowen's Theory as three elements namely Inter-parental conflict, where the child is used as a scapegoat in order to punish or harm their spouse. Family Fusion, which describes a close emotive relation which in turn increases his/her alienation from others. Parent Child Alliances, this signets, the practise of a negative conversation before the birth of a child, more likely to form alliances with the child against the other parent. This concept of triangulation acts as a literary critical tool to interrogate the theme of family disintegrations.

Through critical analysis, the term family disintegrations stand the prime theme of the novel, *The Light Between Oceans* by M.L. Stedman. This Australian novel portrays the triangled story of "the fight between right and wrong" (Cechova Natalia N.p). The novel depicts the protagonist Tom Sherbourne a lighthouse keeper and his wife Isabel Graysmark experience a greater degree of fusion, who face terrible consequences of discovering a baby in a ship wrecked boat off the shore.

This very decision to raise the child as their own, or listen to their moral conscience triangles them unconsciously. Their marital life becomes problematic when a third party, the child Lucy is brought in as a triangle and creates chronic anxiety within the family. Bowen's Theory has influenced symbols and motifs in the very novel, as the lighthouse symbolises the elusive nature of right and wrong. As the light rotates, it illuminates triangles of darkness, brightness and loneliness. It seems right in one moment and seems wrong in the next. The lighthouse in the novel explains the object-relation theory which forms a dyad and assumes itself as a human being.

Even though being an object, the lighthouse becomes a member of the Sherbourne family. Tom and Isabel regard the lighthouse to be their only solace and security when silence uncovers them. It is here, that M.L. Stedman unconsciously depicts the lighthouse 'as a self' which emotionally provides warmth to the couple Tom and Isabel, through wind, and body, watching their happy times. In the novel, The Bowenian concept of triangulation occupies a place in the life of Tom and Isabel who face chronic anxiety and fused relationship. Tom clutches himself into the parental conflict as the author states, "Tom is nervous, excited and worried about becoming a father" (M.L. Stedman 78). Tom faces a shift of tension between the relationships of being a lighthouse keeper, a husband and soon to be a father.

The trauma Tom faces being triangled, by losing his mother as a young boy, estranged him against his brother and overly strict father. These fused feelings are relationally and genetically transmitted to shape Tom's family self. The concept of fusion in triangulation is experienced by every individual be it a writer, actor, politician and a layman. These elements make a self or destroy a self, depending upon every person in different times.

Certain critics have stated that the Family Therapy System was built on mental health problems which arose after the World War II. In a short post war period, this family therapy system modified to be a dangerous drug that left parents in pain towards the anxietal behaviours of their children. In concern to the concept of family, the behavioural pattern of self plays a major role in Jodi Picoult's *Leaving Time*. "It excavates the separation of mother, father and child" (Tess Forest 106). Under deep research, the American novel *Leaving Time* categorises to follow the technique of self stating, "My mother would never have left me behind, not willing. If it is the last thing I do, I'm going to prove it" (Jodi Picoult 100).

The above quote explains how the love of a daughter for her mother transcends even death. The characters Jenna Metcalf and her mother Alice Metcalf depict dysfunctional behaviourism as she disappeared ten years earlier after a tragic accident at the elephant sanctuary in New England. Jenna in the novel seems to involve her emotions always in relation to her beloved mother since childhood. Jenna feels neglected and seeks grief among elephants.

Jodi Picoult quotes, "We elephants are images of humanity, as when we undertake melancholy migrations to die. Worn out by suffering, we die on our great backs, tossing grass up to heaven as a distraction, not a prayer" (480). The inclusion of 'elephants' is a third being in the dyad of the Metcalf family in the above quote. The theme of the novel explicitly states what happens to people who are emotionally fused, triangled in anxiety and polarised to differentiate, that questions their own self in *Leaving Time*. In Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods, Triangulation lets off steam but freezes conflict in place, "Unburdening yourself to a friend will make you feel better. It will also lessen the likelihood that you'll engage the problem at its source" (Nicholas and Schwartz 142).

Bowen defines the second concept 'Differentiation of Self' as "The degree to which oneself fuses or changes into another self in the close emotional relationships" (Kerr 20). Bowen refers to 'Differentiation of Self' as the level of one's emotional maturity and individuality. The eminent Heinz Hartmann a psychologist, "characterised the immature psyche as internally 'undifferentiated' at birth, the ego and superego, which is not distinct from one another" (Mitchell 40). According to Bowen, if an individual does not have enough self to accomplish his or her goals, he or she will attempt to manipulate others through mechanisms such as guilt, rebellion causing dysfunctionality.

In contrast, “A person with well differentiated ‘self’ recognizes his or her bond with others, where one can stay calm and clearheaded enough in the face of conflict, criticism and rejection from thinking cloudily by emotionality” (Kerr 110). Bowen describes those individuals with low self-differentiation, often suffer from depression. To a surprise a person’s level of differentiation greatly affects his or her life choices. To be a mature self, one must be strong in emotions. The theory or task is not wholly personal or social, but rather a delicate cooperation between the two. If this co-operation is maintained, the person can find a way to hold his or her unique self within the fused family.

Therefore Differentiation of Self is both an intrapsychic and interpersonal concept that promotes personal responsibility. The protagonist of the novel Jenna Metcalf unconsciously is surrounded by an invisible differentiated fence. The behaviour depicted by Jenna takes the readers to understand the fondness of her mother, had led her to seek onto the pages of her old journal which is fenced. In due course of time, Jenna stands different from the other family self’s and bounces off calling her, “I am the black sheep of the family” (Jodi Picoult 150). Jenna names herself so as her differentiation instigates her breaking away from the family norms and pursues to seek her lost self with her mother. On the counterpart, Jenna recognises her differentiation of self.

The differentiation of self in both the novels, *The Light Between Oceans* and *Leaving Time* unravels the mystery of ‘closeness’ and underlines the fact that the self of any relationship depends on a single word and umpteen actions. The character Jenna clearly emphasizes that the royal road to differentiation self requires an ability to hold on and stay while feeling emotionally distressed.

The third concept discussed in the research paper is Multi-generational Transmission Process. This process evolves out of differentiation, as stated, “Small differences in the level of differentiation between parent and their off springs lead over many generations” (Kerr 27). To explain, a natural biological balance develops overtime, where family becomes progressively less differentiated. Therefore, the roots of the most severe human problem as well as highest levels of human adaptation are within generation. This signifies the level of differentiation which is traced from one generation to another, especially in large family systems. This generational process by Bowen states, “If we follow the most success of generations, we will see one line of descent producing individuals with lower levels of differentiation. The process may go rapidly a few generations, remain static for a generation or so, and then speed up again” (Bowen 384).

Hence, this Multi-generational process marks the past, present and future existence of life. Every member within the family dyad or out gets unconsciously affected as transmission follows depending on the relationships we have in life.

This process through Bowen Mechanism is invisibly exposed in M.L. Stedman's *The Light Between Oceans* through the character Tom Sherbourne, emotionally accounted to Isabel's joy and sorrow. Multi-generational thoughts reflect Tom's mind through his miserable father stating, "Hard and cold as a tomb" (120). This denotes the trauma, Tom faces being haunted by his past emotions in the present. M.L. Stedman in the novel states, "Sometimes life turn out hard Isabel, sometimes it just bites through you and sometimes, just when you think it's done its worst, it comes back and takes another chunk" (126).

In Jodi Picoult's *Leaving Time*, the concept of Multi-generational Transmission is experienced by Jodi herself beginning from her mother, she states, "To Jane Picoult, my mother, who was my first reader forty years ago and still my first reader today. It's because of the relationship and love between us that I could write Jenna in the first place" (Self Help Daily Quotes). With Bowen's generational process, Jodi Picoult has identified and transmitted her 'differentiated self' to master family dynamics, playing a strong author and a loving mother to her 13 year old daughter Sammy.

Through, Bowen's Theory, Jodi Picoult has penned down her novel *Leaving Time*, "A poignant insight into love and lost, A roller coaster of twists and turns" (Daily Mirror Quotes). Jodi Picoult and Jenna Metcalf reflect this concept from past generation to the present as both explore the degree of anxiety and fondness for their mother in life. In the novel, Jenna remains an instrument of fusion by making self-directed choices as how Jodi Picoult stated in her past life. Thus Bowen's Theory stands by itself a Multi-generational concept that has influenced the literary texts of today's era.

The fourth concept unconsciously visible in the novels of M.L. Stedman and Jodi Picoult is Emotional Cut-off. This forms the driving force of the nuclear system family. Kerr states, "People managing their unresolved emotions with parents, siblings, and other family members by totally cutting off contact with them" (Kerr 33). To understand in a single term, the 'breaking away' and 'growing away' sums up the concept of Emotional Cut-off. This concept is observed in the novel *The Light Between Oceans* by M.L. Stedman. The author narrates the character 'Lucy' with another name 'Grace' who stands a victim of Emotional Cut-off between two families. The author proposes through Bowen Theory:

If one does not see herself as a part of the system, her only options are either to get others to change or to withdraw. If one sees herself as a part of the system, she has a new option to stay in contact with others and change self. (Kerr and Bowen 272)

Isabel Sherbourne in the novel fall a prey to Emotional Cut-off, tending to the graves of the three babies she lost in the long run. Isabel experiences the emotional dis-balance of being a wife to a

mother. Her emotions trigger her married life, “Scars are just another kind of memory” (goodreads.com). Another aspect of Emotional Cut-off is observed through the character Tom Sherbourne who emotionally sees the ‘lighthouse’ as a family member that has soothed his life after World War II. The lighthouse stands as a member of his emotional family as he states:

If the lighthouse has thought us anything, it was to take nothing for granted. That it wasn't safe to put off what mattered, life could snatch away the things you treasured, and there was no getting them back. They began to feel urgency, a need to seize an opportunity before anyone else did. (M.L. Stedman 56)

A similar effect is observed in Jodi Picoult's *Leaving Time* through the protagonist Jenna Metcalf who emotionally is cut-off by her mother Alice Metcalf who has abandoned her since 10 years. This very incident culls out how Jenna dejected with her family, becomes a victim of cut-off from her father with the wrong assumption that he has killed her mother. Jenna enters the ‘growing away’ phase being emotionally dependent on her grandmother since three. She is Emotionally Cut-off as she earns her mother saying, “Sometimes I think of my life as two train- cars hitched together at the movement of my mom's disappearance. Now I'm a kid who is too serious for my rage and too smart for my own good” (Jodi Picoult 15).

Thus, Bowen emphasises the point that taking actions to express ourselves from different theories generates the importance of building a self in a family. Certainly this is not an easy road and it requires the development of skills to tolerate feelings, emotions, and rational thinking. This dissertation foregrounds the fact that other theories land concepts fill a gap left by Bowen Theory.

This dissertation has successfully interpreted ‘The Progeny of Self through Stemma’ that analyses the patterns of human behaviours in life especially in family relationships. Through Bowen's Theory the family self of the novels journey through stemma, a dialogical anthropology of human life, which studies the behaviour of the author and the characters in the novel. On the whole the dissertation has remarkably justified the hypothetical problem that the self of a family is not collective but rather individual through stemma, which is the reconstruction of the literary texts. The overriding purpose is to determine the relationship between the literary text and non-literary theory. This relationship forms a unifying factor in bridging Bowenian Mechanism with Literary Mechanism.

Finally the research done in this paper showcases the fact that literature is multi-dimensional forming a ‘self’ of its own which is personally political in the literary scenario through M.L. Stedman's *The Light Between Oceans* and Jodi Picoult's *Leaving Time*. The ‘Stemmatic Self’ of the literary texts comes alive only when its members the creator and the interpreter make a progeny.

Works Cited

- Bowen, Murray. *Family Therapy in Clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aaronson, 1978. Print.
- Carter, Elizabeth A., Monica Mc Goldrick, and Orfanidis. *The Family Life Cycle: A Framework for Family Therapy*. New York: Gardner Press, 1980. Print.
- Cechova, Natalia. "The fight between right and wrong: Exploring morality in M.L.Stedman's novel *The Light between Oceans*." *Ars Aeterna* 7.2 (2015): N.p., Web. 9 July 2017.
- Forest, Tess. "Treatment of the Father in Family Therapy." *Family Process* 8.1 (1969): 106-18. Web. 11 July 2017.
- Jim, Butcher. *Jim Butcher Quotes*.N.p., n.d. Web. 24 July 2017.
<http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/10746.jim-butcher>
- Kerr, M.E. "Family System Theory and Therapy." A. Guerman and D.P. Krisken (Eds). *Handbook of Family Therapy*. New York: Aronson, 1981. Print.
- ."One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory." The Bowen Centre for the Study of the Family. (2000). <http://thebowencentre.org>
- Kerr, M.E., Bowen M. *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co.1988. Print.
- Mitchell, Stephen A., and Margaret J. Black. *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. Print.
- "Mirror Quotes" *The Daily Quotes*. N.p., n.d. Web. 23 July 2017.
<http://thedailyquotes.com/tag/mirror/>
- Nicholas and M.C. Schwarts. *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*. (Fifth Ed., 137-171). Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001. Print.
- Picoult, Jodi. *Book Rags*, N.p., n.d. Web. 13 August 2017. https://www.bookrags.com/jodi_picoult/
- . *Leaving Time*. New York: Bantam, 2014. Print.
- Stedman, M.L. *The Light Between Oceans*. London: Black Swan, 2012. Print.