

Differentiation of Self and Triangling in Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2007)

Md. Joynul Abedin^{a*} and Suzana Muhammad^b

^aSchool of Humanities, USM, Penang, Malaysia & Department of English, USTC, Chattogram, Bangladesh, abedin@ustc.ac.bd

^bSchool of Humanities, USM, Penang, Malaysia, szna@usm.my

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *August: Osage County* (2007) is a Pulitzer prize-winning American drama by Tracy Letts that depicts an insightful picture of family relationships in the contemporary American cultural milieu. This study identifies dysfunctional dynamics in the family from an American psychiatrist Murray Bowen's concept of triangling in family systems theory (FST). It analyses the complexities of the social-cultural life thrust in contemporary society, which initiates the fissure of the family relationship. Employing the thematic analysis method of Braun and Clarke (2006), this study examines the structure of family dynamics through the lens of triangling in FST. The Bowenian concepts anxiety, relationship dyads, and differentiation of self has been interpreted in the play to demonstrate the deteriorating family bind in *August* (2007).

Keywords: American play, dyad, anxiety, FST, family dysfunction

1. Introduction

Social construction has been changing rapidly in the late postmodern era, after the post-World War situation to be more specific. Individuals and families, on the other hand, must have become vulnerable to the new cultural setting in a fast-changing world. The intense stress that individuals encounter in this social reality has been reflected in the contemporary cultural product as well. Tracy Lett's *August: Osage County* (2007) is not an exception in this regard. This study regards the play as highly contextual with the late postmodern American cultural milieu. Consequently, it connects to the notion of the deterioration in family dynamics. Now the question is whether society imposes an unbearable strain on individuals or not. If affirmative, what changes do today's society bring to individuals and families that cause the thrust? What is the connection between this social construct and deteriorating family relationships? This study deems the Bowenian concept of triangling fit for investigating the missing link when it investigates anxiety, differentiation of self and the triangling process. This result further suggests that rigid triangles are the sign of a functional family, and interlocking triangles indicate the opposite. Therefore, this research establishes the nature of triangles and family deterioration in *August: Osage County* (2007).

Bowen's family systems theory (FST) has been appreciated by scholars from different disciplines due to its scope, applicability, and sophistication in studying human behaviour from a holistic perspective. Hence, it has been employed in literary analysis as well other than its primary focus, psychotherapy. The earlier Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian paradigms have significant shortcomings in studying family relationships. The theories highlight an individual-centric viewpoint rather than fit in individual and family in a single frame. FST, on the other hand, enables the readers to find out the individuals functioning from the perspective of parents, siblings, and spouses in the family. It allows the scholars to study the dysfunctional dynamics through eight concepts i. e., self-differentiation, triangling, nuclear family emotional process, family projection, multigenerational transmission, sibling position, emotional cut-off, and societal emotional process. Alternatively, this paper found the earlier analyses of *August* (2007) employed the Freudian, Lacanian, and Jungian paradigms though; they did not interpret though the lens of Bowen yet. Hence, this study regard it a gap in analysing the play. When "Bowen deemed that individual functioning should be understood in the context of his relationships, that each person's emotional functioning is closely interconnected with each other, with reciprocal impact on each other" (ISS Family Institute, n. d.), triangling was found relevant to investigate the family relationship in the data corpus. It reveals the symptoms of anxiety, relationship dyads, and triangles in individuals as Bowen suggested in the FST. Hence, this paper deems it important to know how anxiety develops in a dyad that triggers generating relationship triangles in the text. In addition, it presents a new theoretical reading to validate the findings offering a solid and exclusive analysis of the link between the said features which is currently absent in the field. Therefore, this issue in academia should be resolved.

2. Bowen's Triangling

American psychiatrist Dr Murray Bowen (1913 - 1990) developed a paradigm named Family Systems Theory (FST). It emerged between the 1950s and 1960s which is a combination of psychology and sociology (Hall, 2013). As aforementioned, Bowen developed eight emotional processes out of which this study employed the second emotional process, triangling. In a family, a two-person relationship is called a dyad. Bowen suggests that dyad is unstable characteristically. A dyad draws a third- party while it is under stress and the dyad alters into a triangle. A triangle exists in a family naturally, which is addressed as the primary triangle. It may be a father-mother-a child when anxiety develops in a dyad, and the triangle releases the stress. The triangle is sustained because it has a lower level of anxiety than the dyad. Its functioning is predictable because the rising tension in a dyad is visible, and one member is more uncomfortable emotionally than the other. Consequently, involving another one, a dyad becomes a triangle (Bowen, 1978; Hall, 2013).

The presence of anxiety in the emotional system indicates the possibility of relationship triangles. The triangling process fluctuates with the level of anxiety, thereby eventually damaging the relationship eventually. However, it is a means of

relieving tension in relationships in the short term (ISS Family Institute, n. d.). Bowen scholar Michel Kerr (1988) further suggested that a triangle “is considered the building block or ‘molecule’ of larger emotional systems because a triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system is unstable because it tolerates little tension before involving a third person” (Hall, 2013). Hence, when two-persons are concocted emotionally that is called a dyad and the emotional involvement of three persons is a triad/triangle in Bowenian FST.

Margaret Hall (2013) further asserts several key points of the triangling process in her book *Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses*. She argues that triangling is the most pragmatic and applicable model for understanding family relationships that provide adequate ideas of family relationships by reporting the chronological steps of the parental or primary triangle and related triangles in a family. Triangles are related to each other, and while any triangle overlaps the others, it generates secondary or interlocking triangles. Bowen suggests that a family is a complex network of three-person interlocking relationship systems where there is a possibility of generating several triangles. Therefore, it is distinct that a triangle is generated from anxiety in a dyad and interlocking triangle forms with a higher level of anxiety (Brown, 1999). This study explored the process of primary and secondary triangles in the play.

This study asserts the Bowenian idea of self-differentiation to be relevant to the analysis while investigating triangular relationships in the text, which is regarded as the cornerstone of FST (ISS Family Institute, n. d.; Hall, 2013) as well. Differentiation of the self is defined as “the ability to be emotionally controlled while remaining within the emotional intensity of one’s family” (as cited in Novienti, 2015). Triangles and Bowen’s differentiation theory are closely related because the more a relationship fuses, the stronger the pull there is to maintain emotional stability by forming a triangle (Brown, 1999). Differentiation of self (DoS) is necessary for learning an individual’s ability to decide rationally, distinguish between reason and emotion, and determine the decision-making process of the individuals in the texts. High and low levels of self-differentiation are two types of differentiation. Individuals with high levels of differentiation can separate their thoughts from their feelings. The ability to gather relevant facts is based on logical reasoning. The first type lives a successful life by making sensible decisions whereas the second, whereas is unable to do so.

Bowen scholars propose two types of selves related to differentiation: hard-core self and pseudo-self. The first one represents judgement with consciousness. The second one is called pseudo-self because the individuals take pseudo-self when under domestic stress (Bowen, 1978). Individuals with pseudo self have fluid and shifting characteristics. The dominant emotions in a person’s relationship system, or pseudo-self, frequently refer to contradictory observations, beliefs, and principles (Brown, 1999; Hall, 2013; Morgan, 2007). Only in a functional family with homeostatic balance does a solid self-emerge, whereas a pseudo-self emerges in a dysfunctional family (Knapp, 1997). The development of a solid self-causes family members to act, think, or feel as if they belong to the family. Individuals, on the other hand, create a pseudo-self while fear and anxiety arise in a family, and their inner and outer behaviour differs. The hard-core self is a steady self that is unaffected by other behaviour, viewpoints, or external forces that suggest greater distinction. The pseudo-self, in contrast, implies

less difference and is highly flexible to outside views and influences (Hall, 2013; Morgan, 2007). This paper reads the text with the concept of solid self and pseudo self and its connection to the relationship triads in the drama.

The course of triangling, therefore, is related to the differentiation of self in several perspectives, such as identifying the low differentiated one in a dyad, relating individuals' basic self or pseudo self, and recognising the genre of triangles in a family eventually. Bowen proposes that different level of self-differentiation produces anxiety in a relationship dyad (ISS Family Institute, n. d.; Novianti, 2015); hence the low differentiated one generally involves another one in the dyad that further makes a triad. This paper, likewise, investigated two visible triangles in the Fordham family of *August: Osage County* (2007), for instance, the Barbara-Bill-Jean triad and the Barbara-Bill-Cindy triad. Thus, this investigation offers a manifestation of the triangling process as well as the functioning of a family from the contemporary American cultural perspective.

3. Literature Review

Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2007) is categorised as a family drama appreciated and awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2008. This study found several significant works on this drama such as Konstantinos Blatanis's (2014) study 'The Value of Tragic in Contemporary American Drama: Richard Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain*, Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*, Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County*'. The paper presents three plays to conduct a comparative analysis. Blatanis opined that the socio-cultural context of postmodernity shows immense reluctance toward the genre of tragedy; as claimed here in his study, the mentioned plays would signify the value of restoring tragedy as a genre in postmodernity.

Blatanis (2014) investigated tragic elements in a postmodernist socio-cultural context where no master narratives or irrefutable cultural doctrines have been found adequate to resolve the problems depicted in contemporary American tragedies. She contends that these plays, which dealt with the widespread social and political crisis on the American stage, illuminated the difference between private and mass responses to it, employing investigative modes in responding to the crisis, which was far from safely denied or conventional. Thus, Blatanis's study is a comparative study of using tragic elements and the reflection of postmodernity in dramas in which no dilemma exists in illustrating reality. Nonetheless, this study does not address the complexities of interpersonal relationships, the relationship between the American cultural milieu, identity formation, and family dynamics.

Contrary to Blatanis (2014), Dova Yovenescha and Desvalini Anwar's (2019) research article titled In Drama *August: Osage County* (2007) by Tracy Letts relates the Freudian concept of neurosis to the protagonist who is claimed to be affected by Borderline Personality Disorder or BPD, showing the symptoms of highly destructive behaviours with inappropriate emotional reactions. The scholars argued in favour of the family's role in a child's personality development, the value of a child's first education,

or the importance of a happy and usual childhood experience as the most important factors in determining an individual's progress. Only people with strong family roots and good grooming skills tend to follow social norms. In the absence of such assistance, a person may experience mental illness, as protagonist Violet Weston does.

Yovenescha and Anwar (2019) have examined several BPD symptoms in the protagonist, including mood swings that frequently appears rude in interpersonal interactions, being judgmental, hyperactivity, unwillingness to admit mistakes, suffering from inner adversity, addiction to drugs or heavy smoking, and sensing everyone's enmity instead of love or compassion. The scholars went on to say that the protagonist's childhood trauma, her husband and sister's infidelity, and her careless daughters caused her to feel unbearable sorrow and that she let it out inappropriately by yelling, blaming, and ignoring others. They conclude that the protagonist's emotional response is wildly out of character, which supports borderline personality disorder. However, their study only focuses on examining the protagonist's suffering and that of others in the American social context. These investigations lack a solid foundation for projecting family relationships as an emotional unit because they are limited to individualistic viewpoint from a Freudian perspective rather than a holistic one.

Unlike the previously mentioned works, Imola Bulgozdi's (2016) research article, "Myth of Youth and Gendered Aging in *August: Osage County* (2007) Tracy Letts," concentrated on two aspects to analyse this play. The myth of youth is first described as the social conception of youth and the sex appeal of males and females; Letts' perception of gendered aging in modern American society is represented by the second. Bulgozdi refers the elderly women like Violet Weston regards female lost sex appeal by age and it is opposite for the men most often. Hence, the two facets of youth that Bulgozdi has discussed here; youth as trouble and youth as fun. While the second refers to young people as consumers and partygoers, the first that describes as the social conception of youth and the sex appeal of males and females is claimed to pose a threat to the convention, social norms, involvement in crime, and violence.

She argued that the main character Violet articulates the myth of youth because, despite her advice to her daughter Barbara not to compete with a younger woman in winning back her husband, women do not have an equal opportunity to succeed in life regardless of their age. Bulgozdi thus asserts Jean's aunt's fiancé is also attracted to her "young and desirable" body. She explains that although older women are not sexually desirable, older men who have power, wealth, and physical fitness are. Finally, Bulgozdi concludes that Tracy Letts demonstrates how society ignores male sexual perversion and child abusers while dramatizing the dangers of alcohol consumption. The analysis of gender issues in Letts's play by Bulgozdi is no doubt solid. Although it has engaged with some other recent studies on youth, gender, ageing, and social dogma, the discussion of family dynamics in the search for identities falls short. Youth-specific consumer culture has an overly simplistic

relationship with identity. In contrast, our study will examine how relationship triangles develop in the family.

This study points out a performance review that was included in an editorial written by E. Teresa Choate in 2009, which asserts the dysfunctional dynamics in modern American families and argues that Letts's charisma is evident in this play. Choate is certain that this play is one of only six to have garnered three prestigious awards. Additionally, Choate links the playwright's biographical shadow to this work. She praises the playwright's skill in portraying familial dynamics and said, "There was something for everyone in that arc" (Choate, 2009). Due to its depiction of American families in disarray and vanity caught in an emotional pickle, the play has garnered attention. Choate goes on to say that in *August Osage County* (2007) the Americans would discover something in common with one another. As a result, aside from illustrating social reality, this review is limited in terms of plot and performance beyond the textual perspective. However, Choate's review does not involve any research as this study intends to explore.

This review, therefore, shows that the protagonist, gender, and ageing have received more attention than a tenuous family relationship. The viewpoint of Violet Weston is used when discussing the other characters. Other than the family as an emotional unit, protagonist-centric psychoanalysis has been developed through studies. This study, alternatively, makes a psychoanalytic reading to investigate individuals' stress development in a family that leads to relationship triangles.

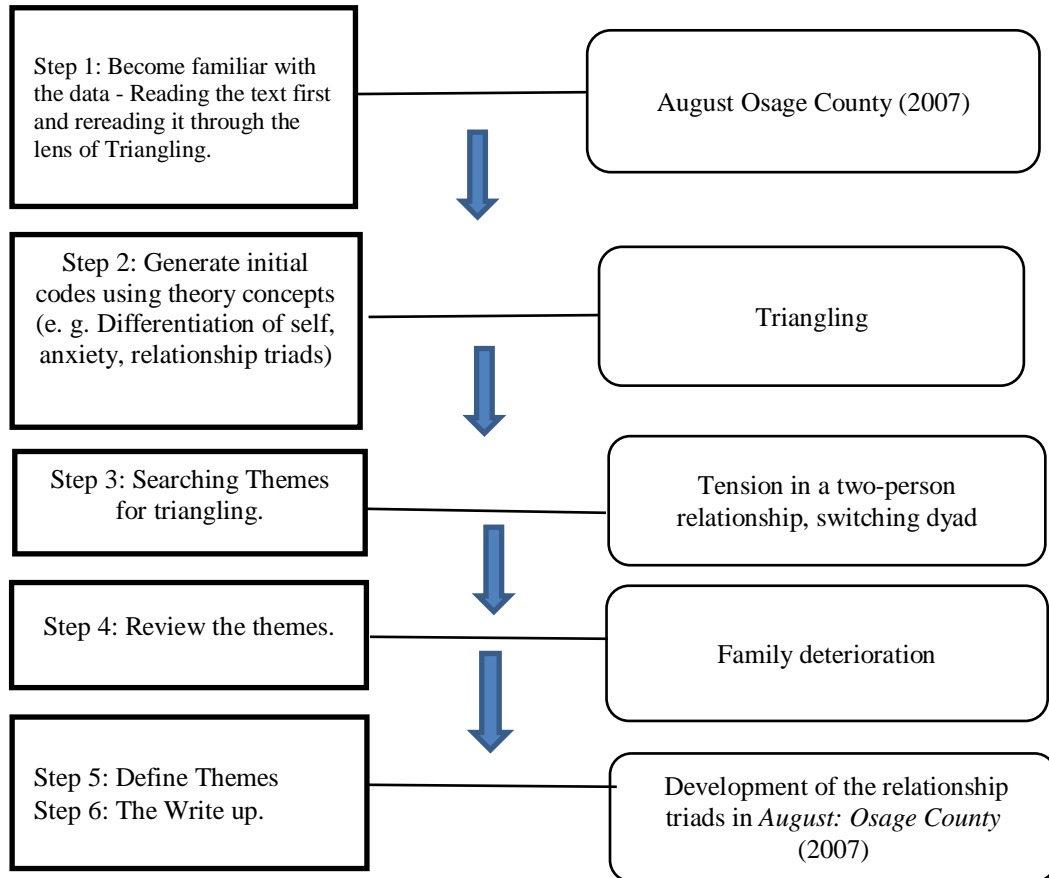
4. Research Method

This paper makes a systematic investigation through the model of Braun and Clarke (2006). For each thematic analysis, it follows six steps. The first step is to become familiar with the data, reading and rereading the text through triangling. In the next step, it generates the initial codes using the FST model such as anxiety, differentiation of self, dyads, and triangles eventually. The third step is to search for themes. At this stage, this study finds relevant themes using the codes such as developing anxiety in an individual, the tension in a dyad or a two-person relationship, emotional shifts among the individuals, and the development of the triangles in the end. Also, it searches for the themes which are related to the aforementioned subthemes. Consequently, this paper finds family deterioration as the major theme in the selected data corpus when Bowen suggests that developing anxiety generates triangles in a family, and heightening the level of stress generates interlocking triangles. Our study proposes the existence of several triangular relationships in *August: Osage County* (2007). Therefore, we intend to find out how anxiety is related to the differentiation of

self, how stress develops in a dyad that triggers generating relationship triangles. Thus meeting the research objective and drawing the conclusion.

Figure 1:

Step-by-Step Process of Thematic Analysis in the Study of Bowenian Triangling in August: Osage County (Braun & Clarke, 2006)



5. Discussion and Findings

5.1 Triangling in *August: Osage County* (2007)

The play *August: Osage County* (2007) is about a dysfunctional American family from rural Oklahoma, USA, which can be interpreted through several lenses of Bowenian FST. This study employs triangling to explore the relationship dynamics of a major character Barbara Fordham. The playwright has illustrated three generations of Weston's

family; Beverly and Violet Weston are the grandparent, their three daughters, Barbara, Ivy, and Karen, and Beverly's grandchild, Barbara's daughter Jean Fordham.

This study investigated Barbara's nuclear family to analyse the course of triangling. Barbara is the eldest daughter of Beverly and Violet. She is married to Bill Fordham; they have a sixteen-year-old daughter, Jean Fordham. Just as Bowen suggests interlocking triangles indicate a highly tensed familial atmosphere (Hall, 2013; Schiff, 2004; Titleman, 2008), this study asserts the same for Barbara's family.

It is difficult to trace a triangle under calm conditions, whereas it emerges under pressure or an anxious familial atmosphere (Brown, 1999). Bowenian scholars suggest triangling is strongly connected to the differentiation of self since the undifferentiated persons usually trigger the process whereas a well-differentiated person can deal with the stress and the issues in a dyad. Alternatively, a lowly differentiated one has less capability to handle the stress and thus involves a third party to lighten it (Morgan, 2007). Titleman, then again, refers to a "Lower level of self-differentiation when combined with a high level of anxiety will result in triangles. On the other hand, when the level of self-differentiation is high and the level of anxiety is low, it is less likely to create "rigid triangles" (Titleman, 2008, pp. 32). Consequently, this study suggests a rigid triangle remains when individual differentiation is high, and anxiety is low. It implies that a family with a low level of anxiety doesn't trigger a secondary triangle. This study thus asserts Barbara's family develops interlocking triangles when it supersedes the optimum limit of anxiety. Therefore, it investigated the reason for developing triangles in the Fordham family exploring the Bowenian concept of anxiety, individual undifferentiation, the emotional shift in a dyad, and finally, the nature of triangles in the text.

This paper asserts that Bill-Barbara-Jean is the parental or primary triangle and Barbara-Bill-Cindy functions as the secondary triangle. Primarily, it investigated what triggers anxiety in the dyads which would allow us to comprehend the development of the relationship triads here. In doing so, it employed the notion of self-differentiation because the triangle is intensely related to the ability:

Triangles are linked closely with Bowen's concept of differentiation, in that the greater degree of fusion in a relationship, the more heightened is the pull to preserve emotional stability by forming a triangle. Bowen did not suggest that the process of triangling was necessarily dysfunctional, but the concept is a useful way of grasping the notion that the original tension gets acted out elsewhere. (Brown, 1999)

This study employs differentiation of self to find out the role of well-differentiated or undifferentiated individuals in the triangling process. Because it investigated the triangle of Barbara-Bill-Jean primarily, it analysed the individualistic differentiation first so that the emotional shift from the primary to secondary dyad can be comprehensible.

This study argues that Bill, Barbara, and Jean make the parental triangle in the Fordham family because anxiety develops in the Barbara-Bill dyad. It happens because a "Triangle occurs because a dyad, a two-persons relationship, is unable to contain, or manage, much anxiety before a third member or thing is needed to absorb the excess anxiety" (Schiff, 2004). Moreover, it asserts that relationship between Barbara, Bill, and

Cindy is the second triangle in the family. Since the different levels of self-differentiation generated stress in a dyad (Brown 1999; Novienti, 2015; Titleman, 2008), this paper identified that the Barbara-Bill dyad suffers from a similar level of anxiety that initiates both primary and secondary triangles in the Fordham family.

In the case of self-differentiation, this study reveals compelling evidence that Barbara is poorly differentiated. Her treatment of Bill, Violet, and Jean reinforces this assertion. For instance, when Jean, the daughter of Barbara and Bill, continuously ignores her mother's command regarding watching her favourite tv show Barbara starts yelling at her. Later, she blames Bill for her daughter's ignorance. However, in the case of a well-differentiated woman, Barbara could have taken the chance of making Bill understand her problem since Bill is cooperative and ready to listen. The following conversation about Jean's unruly behaviour further clarifies the stress in the dyad:

BARBARA (Voice rising): I'm not blame her, because I don't expect her to act any differently when her father is a selfish son-of-a-bitch!

BILL (Voice rising): I'm on your side. How can we fight when I am on your side?
Barbara . . . Barbara, settle down! (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 136)

Although Bill wants Barbara to settle down, her yelling at Bill worsens the situation increasing stress in the dyad. Bill ends up the relationship with Barbara when the stress is unmanageable: "You're thoughtful, Barbara, but you're not open. You are passionate, but you are hard. You're a good, decent, funny, wonderful woman, and I love you, but you're a pain in the ass" (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 138). Further evidence in the text strengthens the claim that Barbara's words and actions are mostly driven by emotion rather than reason.

It refers to her undifferentiated self as well. Barbara's younger sister Karen further deems Barbara less sensible one who fails to understand others properly. For instance, when Barbara blames Steve to seduce a fourteen-year-old girl, Karen instead blames her:

KAREN: I know Steve should know better than Jean, that she's only fourteen. My point is, it's not cut and dried, black and white, good and bad. It lives where everything lives: somewhere in the middle. Where everything lives, where all the rest of us live, *everyone but you*. (Letts, 2008, 3.2, p. 215)

Karen implies that Barbara learns the reality when people are not stereotyped but a fusion of good and evil. Steve, Karen's boyfriend, is not an exception and is not the sole person to be blamed for the incident between him and Barbara's fourteen-year-old girl, Jean. Hence, this study suggests that Barbara is more feeling oriented rather than rationality in treating others. Bowen proposes it as a sign of a poorly differentiated individual.

However, Barbara's action towards Jean is the best example of her poor differentiation. Most importantly, her treatment of Jean was inappropriate when she slapped her hard. It happens because Jean implies by saying that she is only a few years younger than her father's 19-year-old lover Cindy. Jean refers that if Cindy could make a love affair at this age, she is well enough to decide to flirt with her aunt's fiancé, Steve as

well. In the case of a well-differentiated mother, she might have taken the initiative to counsel Jean properly rather than smacking her. A rational person must have dealt with this situation reasonably. Barbara, on the other hand, deals with the situation emotionally.

This paper asserts that Barbara's undifferentiation triggers generating relationship triangles in Fordham family. Barbara-Bill-Jean reveals the feature of the primary triangle when the most frequent pattern of triangling is between parents and one or more children (Schiff, 2004). Then again, it considers Barbara-Bill-Cindy as the secondary triangle because the first one is already failed to retain the stress. This paper identified several issues that assist triangle formation. First, the level of differentiation of Barbara and Bill since the different level of differentiation in a couple generates stress in a dyad (Hall 2013; Knapp, 1997). Second, their teenage daughter Jean Fordham is found reluctant to her mother, which is undoubtedly generated from Barbara's undifferentiation. Third, Bill's illicit love affairs with his student Cindy further endangered Bill's identity as a husband and a father. This approach further helps develop a secondary triangle in the family. Finally, Barbara's refusal of Bill's recurrent attempts to handle the situation rationally with a calm, empathetic, and sensible mind leaves no chance to recover from the damage:

BILL: Barbara, please, we have enough on our hands with your parents right now. Let's not revisit all this.

BARBARA: *Revisit*, when did we visit this to begin with? You pulled the rug out from under me. I still don't know what happened. Do I bore you, intimidate you, disgust you? Is this just about the pleasures of young flesh, teenage pussy? I really need to know.

BILL: You need to know *now*? You want to have this discussion with Beverly missing, and your mother as crazy as a loon, and our daughter twenty feet away? Do you really want to do this now? (Letts, 2008, 1.3, p. 90)

Bill's engagement with his 19-year-old student Cindy no doubt raises the anxiety in the Bill-Barbara dyad. However, this study asserts that Cindy's involvement in the parental triangle is obvious since "Under stress, the triangling process feeds on itself and interlocking triangles are formed throughout the system. This can spill over into the wider community when family members find allies or enemies to unite against" (Brown, 1999). Hence, it implies the stress in the Barbara-Bill dyad forms two triangles in the Fordham family, Barbara-Bill-Jean, and Barbara-Bill-Cindy. The following discussion clarifies the triangling process step by step in the play.

The primary triangle Barbara-Bill-Jean is formed due to the stress between Barbara and Bill. Barbara's personality might have generated the stress primarily though, Bill's adultery multiplies her stress. However, the following dialogue reveals Barbara's anxiety when Bill arrives to accompany Barbara during her tough time:

BILL: What does that have to do—why are you bringing that up?

BARBARA: They're all symptoms of your male menopause, whether it's you struggling with the "creative question," or screwing a girl who still wears a retainer.

BILL: All right, look. I'm here for you. Because I want to be with you, in a difficult time. But I'm not going to be held hostage in this room so you can attack me—

BARBARA: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hold you hostage. You really should go then (Letts, 2008, 1.3, p. 87).

It is distinctly clear that the stress host Barbara and Bill is reciprocal. However, Barbara is found less sensible in the aforementioned dialogue which also suggests her low differentiation of self. Barbara's undifferentiation and Bill's affair with Cindy no doubt triggers stress in the relationship. Thus, Bill and Barbara fail to cope with each other since the different levels of self-differentiation cause anxiety in a dyad (Bowen, 2004; Brown, 1999; Hall, 2013). This study, therefore, highlights that Bill is relatively differentiated since he treats his unruly daughter more patiently. Besides, his reactions do not prevail feeling like an undifferentiated person. Despite having an illicit affair with one of his students, he dares to come before Barbara, though she reacts over it violently and repeatedly. However, he did not abandon his child's mother in her bad times. Bill came to support his wife when Beverly went missing. Hence, Barbara may remain more patient towards Bill while he is with her. Barbara, on the other hand, is found more disturbed and reactive to Bill, whereas Bill's actions are found mitigating:

BARBARA (*Voice rising*): I'm not blaming her, because I don't expect her to act any differently when her father is a selfish son-of-a-bitch!

BILL (*Voice rising*): I'm on your side. How can we fight when I'm on your side?
Barbara . . . Barbara, settle down! (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 136)

However, Barbara doesn't settle down. Bill, on the other hand, wants to console her condolence but he was unable to support Barbara the way she wanted:

BILL: You want to argue? Is that what you need to do? Well, pick a subject, all right, and let me know what it is, so I can have a fighting chance—

BARBARA: The subject is me! I am the subject, you narcissistic motherfucker! I am in pain! I need help! (2008, 1.3, p. 88)

It is undoubtedly that Barbara is in pain with her father missing, her unaffectionate husband, her disobedient daughter, and a drug addict cancer patient mother. This study identified several issues in the play that generate anxiety in the Barbara-Bill dyad. First, Bill's negligence towards his wife accelerates the stress in the dyad. Second, Bill's illicit union with Cindy further broadens the gap between them. Finally, Barbara and Bill have serious controversy over parenting Jean. However, Bill's intention to compromise with Barbara indicates Bill's well-differentiation. In contrast, Barbara's repeated refusal to cooperate with Bill about handling Jean refers to her poorly differentiated self. Besides, her exaggerated response towards Bill refers to her undifferentiation.

Therefore, this study suggests the presence of intense anxiety in the Barbara-Bill relationship. Jean-Barbara's dyad, then again, develops anxiety on the other side. Jean is disturbed by the way Barbara handles her. She shares the situation with Johanna: "What sucks now is that Mom's watching me like a hawk, like, she's afraid I'll have some post-divorce freak-out and become some heroin addict or shoots everybody at school. Or God forbid, lose my virginity (Letts, 2008, 1.2, p. 79). Consequently, it is distinct that Barbara

intends to protect her daughter. However, Jean's feeling towards Barbara suggests that she was not enough empathetic to handle her daughter. This impatience, yelling, incommunicable mother daughter relationship implies Barbara's undifferentiation.

Jean intends to disregard her mother's guidance when she doesn't like the way of communicating with her mother. For instance, Jean's mother even reacts when she watches television on the day of Beverly's funeral: "And you were so very distraught over the start time of your grandpa's funeral. Was this your concern? Getting back here in time to watch the *Phantom of the Fucking Opera*?" (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 122) Bill, alternatively, considers his daughter's perspective more: "Our kid is just trying to deal with this goddamn madhouse you've dragged her into" (Letts, 2008, Act 2, p. 137). Therefore, Bill is found more considerate of his daughter's situation, and naturally, Jean's dyad with her father has become an escape route to release anxiety, the ideal environment to generate a triangle. Subsequently, each dyad Barbara-Bill, and Barbara-Jean develop stress which needs to be released as per the Bowenian triangling process.

Therefore, this study suggests that Bill-Barbara dyad suffers from a severe level of anxiety because of their different level of self-differentiation. It happens because of Barbara's insecurity about Bill's affair with Cindy. Barbara's undifferentiation leads her to suffer more since she has been missing the chance of mitigating the situation with Bill except for showing an exaggerated response. Bill, on the other hand, feels less stress because he can differentiate reason and emotion more like a well-differentiated individual. Although Bill might have suffered more stress since he had made a love affair with one of his teenage students. However, he has managed his stress well. Bill's behaviour towards Barbara implies his well-differentiation.

This study thus highlights the primary triangle consisting of Barbara-Bill-Jean when both Jean and Bill could not handle the stress in the relationship dyad with Barbara. Then again, when the primary triangle fails to retain the stress, the secondary triangle develops sequentially: "Interlocking triangles will be formed when the original triangles can no longer contain the anxiety, and more people are involved, leading to more chaotic and complicated interactions" (ISS Family Institute, n. d. p. 05). This paper thus asserts that the parental triangle Barbara-Bill-Jean cannot hold the stress. Consequently, it develops the secondary triangle.

5.2 Primary to the Secondary Triangle

In Bowen's opinion the primary triangle exists in a nuclear family naturally because the dyad is inherently unstable (Hall, 2013). Hence, it is called the parental triangle as well. This study suggests that Barbara-Bill-Jean comprises the parental triangle since the Barbara-Jean dyad couldn't hold the stress. The primary dyad involves a third party that makes a triangle, similarly any member's involvement from the primary triangle with a fourth party develops a secondary triangle. Consequently, this study asserts that the parental triangle, Barbara-Bill-Jean, cannot hold the anxiety and so member from outside, Cindy, is involved. This study thus argues that Cindy's association with the aforementioned parental triangle paved the way for a secondary triangle, Barbara-Bill-Cindy. This research suggests that several reasons for the failure of the parental triangle and the generation of another triangle. In case the secondary dyad from the parental triangle, Bill-Jean would

have resolved the stress the primary triangle would remain stable. It didn't happen because the secondary dyad of Bill and Jean was not sufficient to mitigate the anxiety in the family. The Bill-Jean dyad from the primary triangle failed to address the anxiety. Because Jean was mad at her father on his affair with Cindy.

It is reflected in the conversation with Johanna, the maid in her grandparent's house: "JEAN: He's fucking one of his students which is pretty uncool, if you ask me" (Letts, 2008, 1.2, p. 79). Hence, this study suggests that the parental triangle of Barbara-Bill-Jean no longer remains functional since Jean's shifting dyad from her mother to her father didn't have worked. The situation, therefore, leads to a different triangle, according to Bowen, the secondary triangle. This study finds that her deviation from Bill has ruined his filial relationship because Bill's identity to Jean as a father becomes problematic as soon as Bill gets involved with Cindy. The evidence from the text implies the inner turbulence of Jean regarding her father's extra-marital courtship. The following conversation reveals that Jean is arguing with Bill regarding the incident that happened with Steve, her aunt's lover, as she was suspected of having a date with Steve at midnight. Bill starts scolding her because she is too young to engage with a middle-aged man like Steve. However, Jean also attacks her father for having an affair with Cindy:

JEAN: He didn't do anything! Even if he did, what's the big deal?

BILL: The big deal, Jean, is that you're fourteen years old.

JEAN: Which is only a few years younger than you like 'em. (2008, 3.2, p. 213)

When Jean made this comment, Barbara slaps her hard since Jean refers to her father's affair with Cindy and tried to justify her incident with Steve. The processes of forming a secondary dyad and generating a secondary triad (triangle) are similar from one perspective. When the primary dyad suffers from anxiety, such as the stress between Barbara and Jean, the anxious person involves another one that completes the triangle. Likewise, when the primary triangle fails to contain anxiety, then a person from the primary triangle includes another person from the outside. Generally, it involves teachers, preachers, doctors, colleagues, and others (Brown, 1999), which further generates a secondary triangle. In the case of the Fordham family in *August: Osage County* (2007), Cindy is included into the family from outside. Therefore, the parental triangle of Bill-Barbara-Jean extended to an interlocking triangle involving Cindy.

6. Conclusion

Bowen's FST is deemed one of the effective tools to identify dysfunctional dynamics in a family when it analyses an individual as a part of the matrix of identity in a family rather than a sole entity like other conventional psychological paradigms. This paper applied the lens to identify the triangles in Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (2007) that illustrates the family relationship from contemporary American cultural perspective. The study's finding demonstrates two interlocking triangles in Barbara's family. Analysing the family theme, this paper identified the emotional matrix among

the individuals. Thus it makes a systematic analysis establishing the connection between the concept of self-differentiation, anxiety, and the triangling process eventually.

This study demonstrates how Triangling helps us understand the complex dynamics of family relationships. Each triangle encounters difficulties and generates impacts differently. The play ultimately demonstrates the fact that family relationships are dynamic and constantly changing, and that understanding the dynamics of triangling is crucial to preserving healthy, and functional family relationships. As a paradigm, FST allows this study to explore the family relationship holistically. Subsequently, it identified the dysfunction in the contemporary American families in Tracy Lett's play. It further discovered a favourable atmosphere in generating interlocking triangles in a family since anxiety grows in modern times and individuals are pretty much unable to handle this pressure that comes from the rapidly changing social construction.

This research identified the dominant cultural features of American society that place family institutions at risk. The family is now unable to handle the pace of development, altered social norms, and persisting stress in everyday life. The thrust influences the individual relationship thus generating more and more unstable triads in the family, which is evident in Tracy Lett's *August* (2007). It demonstrates the interlocking triangles in Barbara Fordham's family primarily though; it identifies other triangles in Beverly Weston's family, for instance, Beverly-Violet-Mattie Fae, and Charles-Mattie Fae-Little Charles which can be explored in further studies. It also recognised the severe dysfunction in contemporary American family dynamics with high social mobility, alcoholism, drug addiction, depressed suicidal parents, incest, seduction, and series of marriages of American males and so on. Subsequently, this study recommends that future research may explore other Bowenian concepts such as Sibling position or societal emotional process in analysing the family theme in Tracy Lett's plays.

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