

## ***Sweet, Sweet Legacy!:* A One-Act Play Satire about Family Dynamics**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This creative thesis aims to illustrate how family dynamics shape individuals' base behaviors that would further determine their personal growth and development. The story goes with three siblings as main characters, Issa, Dru, and Ade, who mock their elder relatives for fighting over inheritance on the day of the burial of their late grandmother. This one-act play uses dramatic comedy. I use Bowen Family Systems theory in portraying family dynamics in my creative work. The family dynamics are passed down to Issa, Dru, and Ade through multigenerational transmission process, differentiation of self, sibling position, and nuclear family emotional process. The family dynamics shape Issa into a parentified child, Dru into an insolent middle child, and Ade into an emotionally avoidant child. This play underscores the importance of acknowledging the patterns and dynamics within us that determine our growth and development.

Keywords: Bowen family systems, family dynamics, growth and development, one-act play

### **INTRODUCTION**

Every family has their own drama, often caused by conflicts, problems, or even small arguments which could snowball into a big fight. The fight could go on or be suppressed for years without resolution, which then turns itself into wounds that are kept inside the body and mind. This is because family members rely on each other for emotional, physical, and economic support, hence they are prone in affecting each other's relationship security or stress (Jabbari et al., 2023). When stress occurs, the family dynamics that have been developed determine initial reactions or responses of how they deal with the problem.

Family dynamics refer to patterns of interactions between family members or relatives, their relationships and responsibilities, and the different elements that influence their interactions, which impact a person's growth and wellbeing through behavioral, psychological, and psychosocial pathways (Jabbari et al., 2023). Family dynamics, whether healthy or unhealthy, are inherited from generation to generation and affect our communication, behavior, stress-coping, and conflict resolution.

Someone said on the internet that some traits are hereditary, and we guess it could not be m12q ore true. Growing up, we learn from our parents and other parents that are around or close to us, including our uncles and aunts. In fact, they are the guiding figures we need to do daily mundane tasks. As stated by Lestari (2012), an individual as a part of cultured society would share their experiences that are relevant to cultural values and accept the shared social values as well. We, as children, are socialized to just internalize the values because it is what our elders believe as true, including the dynamics as well as the wounds they suppressed. All of the family dynamics inevitably and unconsciously get passed down through generations: values, communication, behavioral and relational patterns, healthy routines, dysfunctions, as well as

trauma that shape us into who we are today (Sieber, n.d.).

A family must have been witnessing how family dynamics play a role in each other's daily behaviors and communication skills that develop in absurd or unhealthy ways; in the way they lash out, avoid problems, break down, sulk, argue, and so on. Conflict is naturally inevitable in a close relationship like family; the more we depend on each other, the more it is prone to occur (Lestari, 2012). The problem-solving and resolution, however, are what determine one's strategy to deal with it.

This is where the past repeats itself and eventually turns into a cycle of unhealthy patterns. Bowlby (1979, as cited in Gibson, 2015) stated that our brain has the most primitive parts which alerts us that familiarity offers protection or safety and "we gravitate to situations we have had experience because we know how to deal with them" (p. 8). How we cope in stressful situations, including a fight with our family, might depict what we have been absorbing from the elders around us. Furthermore, destructive coping mechanisms reflect the traumatic experiences that happened or got passed down to us. These wounds, if not treated or resolved, would carry on to the generations after us (IoPT Norge - Institutt for Traumearbeid AS, 2019), passing down the intergenerational trauma.

What we realize is that this phenomenon is inevitable as much as it is breakable. In fact, denial or even nescience is what makes the same situation repeat again (Gibson, 2015). Somehow in between, we will do or behave in the ways we grow up familiar with. The first step to hopefully end the unhealthy dynamics remains the same: acknowledging the patterns we exhibit.

We will tell the story of three siblings of Wahyu family: Issa, Dru, and Ade, who despite being raised by the same family of a stressed-out mother and emotionally absent father, grow into completely different personalities and traits. The dynamics, including dysfunctional qualities, between them bring out the best as well as the worst out of each other. One day, they come home from their grandmother's funeral and bond over criticizing and mocking their elders' behaviors, who are infamous for their long-standing feud from small matters to inheritance. Later Issa finds her pudding, the last gift from her grandmother, vanishes from the fridge, just when she is about to share it with them. The three come up with different approaches: Issa furiously wants to punish the culprit who disrespects her, Dru tries to brush it off to make that day remain sacred as it is not that big deal for her, while Ade stays out of the conflict and offers a logical solution to make a new one with the same recipe instead. Tension arises when the fight gets more personal until it is not about the lost pudding anymore, as long-held bitterness and unsaid feelings start to be revealed between them. Eventually, little do they know, they become exactly like their elders.

For the statement of the problem, we would like to portray the family dynamics that inevitably get passed down by the previous generation. To be specific, we would like to explore how family dynamics are passed down to Issa, Dru, and Ade as the second generation, and how family dynamics shape Issa, Dru, and Ade differently.

Regarding the purpose of this creative work, we would like to show that the family dynamics are passed down to Issa, Dru, and Ade through multigenerational transmission process, differentiation of self, sibling position, and nuclear family emotional process. We would also like to exhibit that the family dynamics shape Issa into a parentified child, Dru into an insolent middle child, and Ade into an emotionally avoidant child.

By creating this creative work, I would like to convey the primary lesson on how we perpetuate family cycles without even realizing it. All our responses, coping mechanisms, and

behaviors are passed down through how our family members treat us. I also would like to poke the audience's self-awareness of how prone we are to the same irrational, bitter behavior of the family members we often criticize, and oftentimes what triggers us is a matter as small as a dessert. It demonstrates how our most intense conflicts frequently stem from deeper, unresolved resentments and a need for control or recognition rather than the object of our dispute itself (money, possession, entitlement, etc.).

### **Theory and Methodology**

The theory we will use for this creative thesis is Bowen family systems by Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist and pioneer of family therapy, as cited in Kerr (2019). The term family dynamics will be used to portray the specified problem: becoming the family we criticize. Bowen family systems is a human behavior theory that "views family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit" (Kerr, 2019, p. 1). In other words, family is naturally connected to each other, even to an intense degree. Family also extremely affects each other's thoughts, feelings, and actions as if we make the same "emotional skin" out of it; making us obtain each other's attention, approval, and support, and respond to each other's needs, expectations, and upsets (Kerr, 2019). This explains how, in family, we interdependently rely on each other and adapt by seeing behaviors of one another.

Based on Bowen family systems theory (as cited in Kerr, 2019) there are eight key components that describe how families function, such as: triangles, differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional process, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, emotional cutoff, sibling position, and societal emotional process. This play will cover four elements: multigenerational transmission process, differentiation of self, sibling position, and nuclear family emotional process.

The multigenerational transmission process shows how minor differences in differentiation levels between parents and offspring rise to significant differences in differentiation among extended family members across several generations (Kerr, 2019). Information is then handed down from generation to generation via relationships, intentional teaching and acquisition of information, and automatic and unconscious programming of emotional reactions and behaviors, which eventually shapes an individual's 'self' (Kerr, 2019).

Differentiation of self reflects individuals' different susceptibility to a groupthink, despite the ways each member thinks, feels, and acts are heavily influenced by their family and social group (Kerr, 2019). An individual is successful in making a difference between him or herself when he or she is able to maintain his or her own identity and emotional reaction. Once established, the level of "self" rarely changes unless a person takes a sustained, and only systematic effort to change it (Kerr, 2019). This reflects on the elders' traits or behaviors that have been crystalized and unable to change, which then gets transmitted to the young offsprings especially when they have not developed their own identity, as those with low self-differentiation tend to fuse with others' emotions and opinions (Kerr, 2019).

Sibling position is how birth order impacts an individual's development and behavior (Kerr, 2019). For instance, the oldest children typically choose roles in leadership while the youngest children frequently tend to be followers (Kerr, 2019). Furthermore, this is supported by Adler's psychoanalytic theory (1928, as cited in Vertel, 2023) about how birth order impacts personal characteristics of individuals. According to Adler (Vertel, 2023), first children have more sense of justice, tend to be achievers, willingly follow the rules, and thus are often made as surrogate parents; meanwhile, middle children often act as a buffer and experience bilateral competition between themselves and both younger and older children, which although make them more independent, might lead them to feel invisible and use negative ways to gain

attention; and lastly, the youngest children tend to be the object of care and protection by the other family members and constantly seen as ‘small’, hence stunt their development to lack of self-discipline and not interested in leadership roles. Furthermore, in a nuclear family emotional process, clinical problems or systems usually develop during tension, which depends on the stress that a family faces, how they cope with it, and how they relate to their social networks and extended family (Kerr, 2019).

Finally, with connectedness and reactivity, family members’ functions become interdependent to each other (Kerr, 2019). This interdependence inevitably creates an emotional system that involves self-regulation of each person, as most human action is influenced by the emotional system, which also serves as the primary catalyst for the emergence of clinical issues (Kerr, 2019) that can only be solved through understanding the family dynamics.

In this creative thesis, we have been doing secondary research with articles, books, and plays as the main resources of data analysis and references. In creating the play, we follow patterns by Hubbard (2017). First, we decided on the topic; then, we settled on the most suitable genre to allow us to focus on how we want to deliver the message. Next, we selected the medium of creative work that works best to convey the topic and genre. Then, we created the characters and their characterization, along with the main plot and dramatic structure. Furthermore, we started to complete the whole picture of the play, which includes conflicts, theme, plot, and synopsis. Lastly, after gathering all details we need, we started the playwriting process.

## CONCEPT OF THE CREATIVE WORK

This creative work uses dramatic comedy as a genre for this creative work to expose how flawed and absurd a family can be if its dynamics carry on in a cycle. According to Smiley (2005), comedy is a type of dramatic form that deals with the ludicrous, represents another side of human nature, and explores the social deviations of humans. Meanwhile, drama here comes in “how characters negotiate the obstacles life throws at them” that will drive the play forward (Hill, 2012, p. 26). In other words, dramatic comedy is a fusion of comedy and drama that explores real life situations while incorporating humor. This genre is suitable to balance such serious societal topics with comedic or exaggerated moments to reflect on the reality we experience in family life.

This creative work takes inspiration from Dita Berlian’s satire titled *Going Home* (2020). It tells the story of Suryani, a devoted Christian, who believes that she is going to die in three days based on her dream. As she wants to go to heaven badly, she tries to make her persistent and atheist daughter, Renata, to accept Jesus and be a Christian. In the end, an accident of burglary leads Renata to convert to Christianity, as she prays to Jesus to save them. It turns out that Suryani is meant to ‘go home’ to the Lord as in go back to church on Sunday—not to heaven. This play revolves around the same theme of family dynamics as one that I am going to write about.

Another work that inspires us is a comedy of manners *He Said and She Said* by Alice Gerstenberg (*He Said and She Said - a One-act Play by Alice Gerstenberg*, n.d.). This play shows how gossip and rumor could start out a huge misunderstanding and even nearly destroy a friendship. Mrs. Packard, the antagonist, tells Enid, one of the protagonists, bad things about what she heard everyone say about Diana, her best friend and main protagonist. This play has the effects and tension that I want to portray in the play.

## Theme

Some traits are hereditary. Family dynamics and intergenerational cycle determine our functioning in daily life. I would like to portray how family dynamics, that include unhealthy patterns, shape the characters' behaviors, one of which is how they deal with conflict and solve their own fight. As for the intergenerational cycle, we would like to show how the interaction patterns of the elders are eventually being transmitted to the next generation.

## Plot

We use dramatic structure (Hubbard, 2017) for the plot of this one-act play to make the story go on flow especially in a short duration. The plot includes exposition, inciting incident, rising actions, climax, falling actions, and resolution.

## Synopsis

Three siblings, Issa, Dru, and Ade, just got home from their beloved grandma's funeral with long faces and big sighs. On such a sacred day that was supposed to be a good memory, they had to watch a bizarre phenomenon within their family, where their elders feuded with each other over inheritance. The three start gossiping and ridiculing their elders' behaviors, vow not to be them when they get older. Then their cousin Bianca joins, still feeling blue from the recent event. Issa means to console her by sharing the last pudding their grandma left for her; but when she reaches for it in the fridge, the pudding is nowhere to be found. Furious, Issa starts to nag and accuse everyone of stealing it. As a heated argument between the three rises, long-held bitterness starts to unfold; it is not about the pudding anymore but a lifetime of unspoken resentments and unfulfilled needs, recreating the scene of a sibling feud they are most familiar with.

## Characters

Main characters:

Issa, a 24-year-old woman, is the eldest daughter of the Wahyu family. Her mother made her 'the right hand' or a parent child, hence the recognition she craves growing up for taking care of herself and her siblings relentlessly. She is the most private, if not secretive, in the family; she rarely opens and keeps the burdens strictly for herself ever since the last time she tried to, it caused tension between her and her mother. She almost never gets off her phone as it holds all her secrets, including her debts and loans. This also makes her hypervigilant to keep herself together in front of her family. Issa tends to help her siblings to feel relieved of her unsolved problems but gets stressed in the process and demands pity and respect from them for all her efforts.

Dru, a 22-year-old woman who grew up as a middle child, did not really have anything special. She is always stuck in between her charming sister and smart brother. This makes Dru adapt ways to gain attention from her family, by being nonchalant about the stuff she is not interested in and throwing cheeky jokes or shades anytime she wants to. She is currently struggling with job-seeking.

Ade, a 19-year-old boy, is the last child and the smarty pants of the Wahyu family. He is burdened with high expectations on him as a smart child. Plus, growing up as the youngest he got all eyes on him, to the point he never bothered to try anything unfamiliar in order not to mess up. But for once, he finally messed up intentionally: sneakily eats the pudding he did not know was Issa's.

Side character:

Bianca, a 21-year-old woman, is one of Wahyu's cousins. She initially comes to Issa's house from their grandma's house next door to seek calmness and some peace, until Issa loses her pudding. Bianca is stuck to pick sides after failing to mediate them.

### **Conflict**

The conflicts of the story will revolve around the three main characters with each other, making them external with man against man and internal with man against him/herself (Clark, 2007). First, the external conflict (man against man) happens when the characters must argue against each other because of different goals and wants (Clark, 2007). Issa suspects Dru and Ade as the stealer of her pudding, and eventually when their argument gets personal with unresolved feelings unfolding, they must defend themselves while pointing fingers for the pain they cause to each other. As for the internal conflict (man against him/herself), each character is struggling with their inner psychological problems that are triggered by the lost dessert (Clark, 2007). For Issa, the missing pudding is a symbol of betrayal that forces her long-held exhaustion as a responsible and reliable eldest sister to crash out. For Dru, the lost pudding is nothing compared to her feeling of alienation all this time, hence she suggests not ruining the day and dismissing the matter to focus on commemorating their grandmother instead. Meanwhile Ade, who prefers to be a cynical observer to avoid the chaos of feelings, gets cornered by Issa's anger when he offers a solution to make another pudding. Internally, he is panicking because he is the one who ate it; to conceal the fact, Ade keeps adding the subjects of how Issa and Dru have wronged him.

### **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, family dynamics truly shape us as individuals in a unique way. Despite being raised in the same family, the experience and the output could vary from each other, creating different personalities and behaviors. However, family dynamics still play an important role in whether our growth and development are healthy or unhealthy; how we communicate with, behave, and respond to each other.

This play underscores the importance of acknowledging the patterns and dynamics within us that determine our growth and development. Family, as the closest and foremost community in life, inevitably affects each other in the process of growing up which builds our traits, problem-solving, stress-coping, and communication in our interpersonal relationships. Thus, it is important for families to be a secure and supportive place for each member to grow up and function, by setting out examples and passing down traits and experiences that are healthy and ideally positive. Hopefully, this play can help to raise awareness of how important it is to be an emotionally healthy individual to contribute to healthy dynamics within a family, and that the first step of healing and changing is acknowledging any damaging patterns within us.

Our recommendation, as the topic of family dynamics has not been explored wide enough, is for writers to create other kinds of creative work besides stage plays talking about the topic, like film, short stories, or novels. Family dynamics are complex, and there are healthy and unhealthy patterns that occur inside, and each family has their own dynamics so the experience could be diverse. Writers can start with their own unique experience to come up with different family dynamics. It is most likely that exploring family dynamics in this era, where younger generations are more aware about the issues of family and mental health, is a good opportunity. Writers can also explore why such family dynamics could happen in family and portray the direct impact on the family members.

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