INTRODUCTION

Other things may change us, but we start and end with FAMILY.

Anthony Brandt, American Composer, editor

Home is the place where, when you have to go there
They have to take you in.

Robert Frost (The Death of the Hired Man)

The ultimate economic and spiritual unit of any civilization is still the FAMILY.

Clare Boothe Luce (1903-1987, American Diplomat, Writer)

Despite its familiarity the concept of the family is elusive. The protean nature of family life makes it difficult to establish a single definition of the family or a clear analysis of its functions. Traditionally the family is perceived to be located in the private sphere, beyond the scope of public scrutiny or public intervention. As the
numbers of family configurations flourish, the very notion of family has been broken
down into a plurality of meanings. Today's family forms a decentralized network of
relationships. At the beginning of the millennium, the monolithic order of the family
has been supplanted by a pluralistic order of families including single-parent
households, gay and lesbian households, and mixed ethnicity households. This
dissertation addresses developmental issues that reflect basic cultural anxieties of
contemporary times. In order to examine the role of the American family in the works
of Anne Tyler, Josephine Humphreys and Gail Godwin, I have adopted an eclectic
approach. I have integrated Bowen's Family Systems Theory with socio-historical
parameters of cultural studies as a critical framework for my literary analysis.

Unlike conventional psychological theory which focuses on the individual, Family
Systems Theory explores the "connectedness" (Bowen 35) and "reactivity" (Bowen
35) found among family members and encourages people to think of issues like
conflict, difficult relationships, loneliness, and others in terms of a multigenerational
family or a "system." (Bowen 35) From the point of view of Family Systems Theory,
the family system becomes the source of "the matrix of identity rather than only the
individual" (Bowen 44). Sigmund Freud felt that identity is biologically based and left
intact the notion that identity is self-contained. Murray Bowen challenges this notion
and asserts that the psyche cannot be understood as a discrete, autonomous structure.
He explores that "identity develops through social interactions" (Bowen 45) and "the
family plays a major role in the interpersonal development and selfhood” (Bowen 45). Bowen’s distinctive theory recognizes the family as an organic and emotional unit whose functioning is rigorously determined by its patterned method of anxiety management.

The Bowen Family Systems Theory places an emphasis on the central role of the family as an emotional system in which the functions of each member of the family is interconnected with the processes and interactions within the family. In this family system, family members are constantly modifying and adapting their behavior to achieve a balance and stability in the family system (McKnight p.263). The eight basic concepts of Bowen’s Family Systems Theory are: “Levels of differentiation of self, the nuclear family, Family projection process, Multigenerational transmission process, Sibling position, Triangles, Emotional cut off and Societal emotional process” (Bowen 16)

“Differentiation of self” (Bowen 16) refers to one's ability to separate one's own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of the family. Individuals with "low differentiation"(Bowen 73) are more likely to become fused with predominant family emotions. Those with "low differentiation"(Bowen 73) depend on others' approval and
acceptance. They either conform themselves to others in order to please them, or they attempt to force others to conform to themselves. They are thus more vulnerable to stress and they struggle more to adjust to life changes. To have a well-differentiated "self" (Bowen 73) is an ideal that no one realizes perfectly. They recognize that they need others, but they depend less on other's acceptance and approval. They do not merely adopt the attitude of those around them but acquire their principles thoughtfully. These help them decide important family and social issues, and resist the feelings of the moment. The "nuclear family" (Bowen 76) concept describes four relationship patterns that manage anxiety, marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment of one or more children and emotional distance that govern where problems develop in a family. The “Family projection process” (Bowen 78) describes the way parents transmit their emotional problems to a child.

Triangles are thought to be the smallest stable relationship system. A two person relationship can be stable as long as it is calm, however, when anxiety increases, a third person is drawn in to dissipate the anxiety. The “nuclear family emotional process” (Bowen 80) refers to how the family system operates to handle stress and anxiety. The “multigenerational transmission process” (Bowen 81) refers to how the family projects anxiety from one generation to another and sibling position draws attention to important personality characteristics that fit with the position the person
grew up in (Bowen, 81). Emotional “cut off” (p. 81) involves one generation cutting off contact with previous generations in order to avoid relationship problems, and societal regression, which is based on the notion that societal problems are similar to emotional problems in the family (Bowen, 83). By focusing on defining a self, while giving up some togetherness and maintaining emotional contact, one’s functioning would become less dependent on support and acceptance from others (Bowen p. 91). The “Societal emotional process” (p. 87) describes how the emotional system governs behavior on a societal level, similar to that within a family, which promotes both progressive and regressive periods in a society.

Differentiation is a product of a way of thinking that translates into a way of being. In order to increase one’s level of differentiation, Bowen's Family Systems Theory recommends learning the characteristics of the family systems, making postulations about one’s role in the system, and learning to observe patterns of one’s own emotional reactions in the system. In order to do this, one must be in regular contact with their family, make visits, bridge emotional cut-off, work on person to person relationships with parents, develop ways to modify emotional reactions, and build an “I-position” (p. 85). Defining a self involves increasing one’s ability to think, perceive, speak and act from a fact-based rather than a feeling-based assessment.

More specifically, the Bowen theory states that the manifestation of behavioral symptoms by individual by any one family member constitutes a reaction to other family members or changes in the relationships within the family. Based on this perspective of the centrality of the family system, Bowen's multigenerational approach seeks to examine each aspect of the family within a comprehensive relationship system in order to identify patterns across multiple generations. By developing an understanding of the changes in the patterns of the complex relationships in the extended family system, therapists can then determine how effective strategies can be developed to challenge dysfunction patterns of interaction (Bowen 65). Hence Family Systems Theory emphasizes the interdependency of family members rather than focusing on individuals in isolation from the family.

Cultural studies is an ever-changing field of study concerned with the role of social institutions in the shaping of culture. It involves examining the meaning and practices of everyday life and lies at the interface of social science and literature. In addition to observing culture, it intervenes through representations and interrogates, in effect moving towards a more just and equitable society. Hence an assimilation of family systems theory with cultural studies approach enables me to understand how the novels of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin serve as testimonies and critiques of the late twentieth century American family.
Patricia Drechsel Tobin in her work *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative* writes that “the disappearance of god, the end of history, the demise of man, the death of the novel, the murder of the father—these are apocalyptic phrases by which we now measure the passage of our culture” (p.14). Twentieth century is marked by a series of binary categories which dominates economics and politics. The most important among them are power and powerlessness; male and female; profits and ethics and legality and illegality. By focusing on solidarity and kinship Anne Tyler, Josephine Humphreys and Gail Godwin in their unique ways are providing recuperative for the disintegrating American family. A comparative critiquing of the fictional texts of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin reveal the conflicts, confrontations and compromises that interdependent family relations generate. From Kate Chopin to Ellen Glasgow to Harriette Arnow, southern white women writers have spoken out to attack the concept of female subservience and self-sacrifice for husband and family, revealing its destructiveness not only for adult women themselves but for the very children, husbands and society these women have served. They often attempted to shatter the symbol of white southern womanhood—especially since the symbol was one of ultimate selflessness and acquiescent silence.
Contemporary southern women writers struggle to create new patterns of womanhood for their heroines who no longer equate femininity with defeat, gentleness and kindness with sacrifice and submission. The works of the three contemporary southern women writers focused on in this study unveil that the concept of feminism can be reexamined in a hitherto unexplored dimension. In other words their works reveal that the term feminism can be expanded into a wide array of meanings that exist in white urban middle class families. These novelists may be Southerners but in their fictional texts, they transform the regional voices and visions into quintessentially American experiences. Hence the purpose of this dissertation is:

A) To evaluate the critical effectiveness of family systems theory as a literary construct for analyzing the family fictions of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin

B) To explicate how Tyler, Godwin and Humphreys reflected contemporary issues in their fictional world.

C) To increase our understanding of the importance of family in this increasingly fractured world.

Chapter I, *Socio – Historical survey of the American Family* provides an overview of the history of the American Family. The chapter examines the historical events and conditions in the last three decades of the twentieth century that affected opinions, choices and the everyday lives of American families. For my analysis I have referred
to psycho-social theories of Murray Bowen and John Bowlby and works of social historians like John Demos, David Blakenhorn, David Popenoe, Barbara Defoe Whitehead, Stephanie Coontz and Judith Stacey I have also explored how the popular culture reflected the changes in the American family.

Chapter II, titled Making of the Artist: Biocritical data of Anne Tyler Josephine Humphreys and Gail Godwin is a study of the close relation between the familial background of these authors and their artistic creation. This chapter explores how the narrative vision of the familial bondings of these three authors is closely related to their personal lives. For my analysis I have referred to the biographies and the nonfictional works of these writers.

The third chapter titled Unhappily Ever After: Fate of Children in Broken Families is an exploration of the impact of broken families on children. Bowen’s Family System Theory views families as inextricably interconnected. It states that neither people nor their problems exist in vacuum. The emotional functioning of family members is profoundly interdependent with changes in one part of the system reverberating in other parts. Families repeat themselves. As a result relationship patterns in previous generation may provide implicit models for family functioning in the next generation. The novels that would be viewed in this chapter are Tyler’s Dinner at the Homesick Resturaunt, Humphreys’ Rich in Love and Godwin’s Father
Melancholy's Daughter. A close study of these novels reflects that the lives of these fictional characters are similar to the lives of thousands of children being reared in such broken homes.

The fourth chapter entitled Family and Feminism examines how Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin are redefining feminism and its relation to the patriarchal family system. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new wave of radical feminism emerged that was overtly hostile to the institution of marriage. These feminist thinkers considered the traditional marriage as the ultimate oppressor of women. To them, the biggest obstacle to the realization of an egalitarian society is patriarchy and the social order that supports it is marriage. So their primary goal over the last four decades has been efforts to undermine marriage, family, religion and masculinity. Among the key figures in this new, more radical feminism were: Kate Millet, Germaine Greer Shulasmith Firestone and Gloria Steinem. This chapter is an exploration of how Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin are redefining feminism in the context of the American family structure. For my analysis I have referred to Tyler's Earthly Possessions and Ladder of Years Humphreys' Dreams of Sleep and Godwin's Glass People

Chapter V, Reflections: Re-defining Wholeness in Extended Families is a re-view of the importance of the extended family in America. The extended family refers to
the nuclear family, plus the network of grandparents and other members of the extended family. Aging is not unique to modern times, but only in the past hundred years it has become commonplace. One of the most dramatic developments of the twentieth century is the increased longevity of the population. Life expectancy in 1900 was forty seven years, but now it has increased to seventy eight years. Old age has in fact been an important area of sociological research that a whole new field of specialization called gerontology has come into existence. For my analysis I have related the novels of Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin to contemporaneous medical and sociological discourses on aging and old age. Earlier research and moral discourse have tended to treat the elderly in decidedly passive ways. In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the tri-generational family structures. Tyler in The Clock Winder, Breathing Lessons, Digging to America and Noah's Compass, Humphreys in Dreams of Sleep and Godwin in Violet Clay and The Odd Woman are refuting the stereotypical images of aging and through their fictional world are promoting a positive attitude towards aging. Family Systems Theory reflects the relevance of both an individual's immediate and extended families for his identity formation. This chapter is an exploration of how Tyler, Humphreys and Godwin in their fictional world embark on the importance of elderly members in the family.