

Movie Critique: Mrs. Doubtfire

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Divorce is a widespread social phenomenon. Divorce is not new. For ages, individuals from different cultures, economic backgrounds, languages, and education have considered divorce as a means to terminate their legal matrimony. People divorce for various reasons. Domestic abuse, extramarital affairs, lack of communication, differences in personality, economic incompatibility, addictions, and discord are common reasons for marriage dissolution. However, regardless of the rationale behind a divorce, the whole family system, children, and parents can be left hugely affected. The 1993 academic award-winning film *Mrs. Doubtfire*, written by Randi Mayem Singer, and Leslie Dixon, depicts the devastating effect of divorce on a family structure and dynamics. Thus, in this paper, the family portrayed in the movie the Hillard's, is utilized to analyze the family's functioning and dynamic. In doing so, themes and family dynamics are discussed. In addition, theoretical approaches, and interventions, are presented as an attempt to reconcile the issues the family is struggling with.

Mrs. Doubtfire is an entertaining, educative, and thought-provoking American drama-comedy movie. In the film, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, Daniel, and Miranda Hillard are middle-aged married couples, and together, they have three children, Lydia, Chris, and Natalie. Although they were married for more than 14 years, they battled to keep their marriage alive, primarily due to their differences in temperament. Daniel is a comic, voice actor. However, Daniel has difficulty keeping a job. At the beginning of the movie, he resigned from his voice-over employment after the director of the cartoon he was dubbing confronted him for adding lines to the cartoon character that did not correspond to the script (smoking). Despite his immature personality, Daniel loves his children enormously. However, his love for his children could not preserve his marriage. Following the birthday party of his son Chris, which was packed with farmyard

animals and children, Miranda asked Daniel for a divorce. For not being able to maintain stable employment, Daniel lost the legal custody of his children. Aside from assigning a court liaison to oversee his case, the judge permitted Daniel to see his children once a week, on Saturdays. However, not delighted with the judge's ruling, Daniel decided to spend time with his children at any cost. His bravery and paternal love led him to impersonate a female British housekeeper, Mrs. Doubtfire.

Loneliness and separation are the relevant themes of the movie, and they overlap each other. Although Daniel and Miranda were married for 14 years, they were emotionally isolated. Miranda viewed Daniel as an immature child, not a capable, responsible man who could help her with the household expenses and chores. After Daniel resigned from his voice acting job, she was the sole breadwinner. Astonishingly, soon after she was awarded full custody of her children and Daniel left the house, she commenced a romantic relationship with her affluent coworker, Stuart. She even insofar loved the company of Mrs. Doubtfire, who Daniel disguised into. Thus, this demonstrates that Miranda aspired for a companion or someone she could lean on, but Daniel was not the one.

On the other hand, Daniel was always present in his children's lives. Following his separation from Miranda, he felt lonely and devastated. He has a remarkable brother, Frank, who he could count on after his marriage fell apart and an entertaining career; however, they could not occupy the space his children occupied. He exists for his children. Daniel's desperation to be close to his children led him to be his children's housekeeper, under the disguise of an old British woman. Moreover, although the judge debased the visitation agreement to supervised visits, Daniel found a way to be close to his children through the daily television children show, Euphegenia's House, where Daniel, the host, appears unashamedly as Mrs. Doubtfire.

Further, as the behavioral patterns displayed by Daniel and Miranda affect the entire family system, it is essential to conceptualize their case clinically from a therapist's viewpoint. Rage, impulsivity, and resentment are detected behaviors that flow through the movie. In the second court hearing, judging Miranda's displayed facial expression, she was not happy with the court judgment regarding Daniel's behavior or the visitation arrangement. Thus, one question her reasonings for disclosing to the judge that Daniel masqueraded to a female housekeeper to be near his children. It could be many reasons; however, anger and impulsivity were at work.

Moreover, Miranda was fumed with rage at her son's birthday party. Her behavior is understood, for her house was trashed, and she was obliged to clean it. However, a divorce could have been evaded if Miranda had chosen another route to mend her differences with Daniel, family therapy, for example. In fact, Daniel proposed counseling and traveling as an alternative to a divorce; however, Miranda deduced divorce was the best choice for them. For Miranda, Daniel was a child caged in an adult body; therefore, he could not comprehend how she innerly felt. She failed to discuss thoroughly with Daniel her rationale for a divorce. She only mentioned that she despises the person she had become and was no longer impressed by Daniel's antics. Daniel, nonetheless, proved there could still be hope for their marriage, for his behavior radically changed after their marriage ended. He learned to cook, clean, sew and improved his parenting style.

Daniel also displayed impulsive behaviors throughout the movie. To illustrate, he agreed to dine at Bridges, a renowned restaurant, with Miranda, her boyfriend, and their children when he has already acceded to meet Mr. Lundy, the CEO of the toy company he worked for. Even though his children and Miranda implored him to accompany them to the restaurant, he could have refused. His meeting with Lundy was crucial, for it opened the door for Daniel to earn more

money, which he greatly needed. An apartment and stable employment were, at first, the judge's underlined conditions for Daniel to obtain joint custody of the children.

As the themes portrayed in the movie are common in marriage and family therapy, it is appropriate to consider a few theoretical approaches to clinically understand the Hillard family's problem. From the plethora of developed family therapy theories, the theories embraced by Walter Kempler, Murray Bowen, and Virginia Satir entirely coincide with the issues portrayed in the movie. To begin, Kempler's theory model, experiential family therapy, is suitable for the Hillard family. It does not scapegoat a family member as the problem; in his theory approach, the entire system is seen as equal parts. Capuzzi and Stauffer (2021) stipulated that in Kempler's perspective, every member of a given family is crucial for self-healing and healing for the entire family. Thus, in the movie, the whole family would have had to collaborate for inner healing and optimal functioning of the family.

The four concepts Kempler highlighted in his theory for conflict resolution (agreement, compromise, giving up, and winning) are reflected in the movie. To illustrate, at first, Miranda appeared as the film's villain, but at the end of the film, she realized the importance of Daniel's presence in the family. Thus, she gave up on doing what the judge dictated; despite the court's decision regarding visitation, she arranged for Daniel to meet his children daily after school. Thus, agreement, compromise and giving up facilitated everyone in the family to be happy ultimately.

Moreover, besides the stated concepts, constructs such as union and distance, expanding awareness, comprehending each family mode of communication (verbal and nonverbal), and unifying the family to experience a real encounter can be applied to the situations presented in the movie. An encounter experience dismantles barriers of miscommunication. Thus, during a

genuine or authentic encounter, in a therapy setting, Miranda would be encouraged by the therapist to share with Daniel all that she could not communicate before in her marriage (her fears, anticipations, and desires). The meeting would catapult her to see Daniel for who he is, a man, the father of her three children.

Differentiation from the self, emotional cutoff, and triangle are constructs from Bowen's family system theory detected in the movie. According to Bowen, self-differentiation is characterized by the innate power that propels every human to turn into a genuinely discrete individual with the capacity to think, feel, and become emotionally autonomous (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 151). In Mrs. Doubtfire's movie, Daniel and Miranda have different personalities and interests. Aside from his sense of humor, Daniel is confident and continually quest for what he wants. In contrast, Miranda is choleric and serious-minded. In addition to that, she loves to work, disciplined, and is organized. Throughout the years, she became emotionally cut off from Daniel. During one of her disputes with Daniel, she disclosed that she and Daniel are different, thus, do not have anything in common.

Metcalf (2011) posits that in Bowen family system theory, a triangle is "a three-person emotional configuration that is the basic building block of any emotional system." Also, Capuzzi and Stauffer (2021) stipulate that a third person is involved when two people are unstable due to anxiety, to stabilize them. Thus, in the movie, Mrs. Doubtfire, Lydia, Daniel's and Miranda, the oldest daughter, was the third person involved in her parents' conflict that helped stabilize their interaction. In the movie, Lydia sided with Daniel. The dynamic between Daniel and his children were strong. All his children enjoyed being with him and were unhappy with the court's decision. Nonetheless, Lydia was the one who confronted her mother about not letting Daniel spend time with them and showed discontentment when Mrs. Doubtfire first arrived at their

house. Compared to Chris, she did not hesitate to embrace her father when she discovered that her father was indeed Mrs. Doubtfire. Moreover, aside from her siblings, she was one of the reasons Miranda decided to revoke the judge's decision and offered Daniel to pick up their children daily from school. Overall, all three children contribute to the stabilization of the system.

Like Kempler's and Bowen's theory approach, Virginia Satir's human validation model is applicable to the problems presented in the Hillard family. While other constructs in Satir's model can be applied during counseling sessions, the family as a microcosm concept is reflected in the movie. "Satir theorized that each person, being human and acting in a human way, does things based on their own unique understanding" (Capuzzi & Stauffer, 2021, p. 139). Therefore, viewing Daniel in Satir's human validation model's loop, although Miranda despises Daniel's behavior, his behavior is understood as a human. He is unique and expected to act in a unique way. This construct would be highly beneficial for the family in a counseling setting for it would help the family accept themselves for who they are. As postulate Tam (2006), Satir' therapy's primary goal is to aid clients see their inner beauty and attune to the potentials they have for their lives.

Various interventions can be used to help the Hillard family, however, the concepts highlighted in Bowen family system therapy, and Kempler's existential family therapy, are the interventions or treatment Model preferred. In addition to those models, play therapy is considered for it could be used with Nathalie, the youngest child. During the sessions, it is favorable that the therapist is active during the sessions like Kempler, for it would incite the family to disclose what they are holding inside, such as in the case of Miranda. The sessions

could be brief, or as the family desire. The goal is to rebuild the family dynamic and for the family to act as a whole even though the parents are divorced.

To conclude, Mrs. Doubtfire is a family comedy movie that portrays divorce and his consequence on the family system. There are repeated themes in the movie that contribute to the ex-couple discord (Daniel and Miranda). Miranda distinguished that Daniel was indeed different from her; nonetheless, his demeanor or manner to judge things does not prevent him from being a great father.). The movie shows that a marriage can function even amid a divorce. However, a family would operate healthily if only a few people put their parts in the healing process.

References

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