

The Fragmented Family Relationships in Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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ABSTRACT

Sam Shepard (1943 – 2017), USA. He was a celebrated American dramatist author, actor, a screenwriter and a director. He lived a difficult childhood through moving around several American army bases until his father's retirement from the army. Due to Shepard's father's growing alcoholism and lack of responsibility for his family, young Shepard developed a disagreed relationship with his father, admiring his courage and hard-working personality, yet scorning him for his irresponsibility and unpredictable moods. Shepard's *Buried Child*, was first presented at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco, where Shepard was a playwright in residence from 1974 to 1984. The first appearance of the play was in 1978 and it won a unique prize, the Pulitzer Prize in 1979. The play was described by its author as a "typical Pulitzer Prize winning play". *Buried Child*, then received fine critical appreciation that reflected its successful revival.

Key words:

Family relationships / *Buried Child* / American Dream / Identity.

Presenting the problems of America in the metaphor of the breakdown of the American family, the play made those problems more accessible to its audience. It brought this "epitaph for the American family as an institution" (Doris 1982, 53). It was a work that could have been easily moved to off- Broadway and have had a respectable number of performances. The structure of the play is a three-act structure where the writer presents three generations in one family. The characters and struggles are created in act one, in act two, the conflict gets worse and the antagonist gets stronger. The conflict is resolved in the third act.

The play depicts a picture of a family of eccentrics and outcasts who tried ineffectively for years to deal with the sensitive demolition caused by the awful act of incestuous relationship done by the mother and her eldest son. Richard Eder comments on *Buried Child* as an astonishing work which laments the loss of an ideal:

"Beneath Shepard's derogatory portrayal of the American family a cincer wail of the loss of an ideal. Shepard's structure does not simply condemn chaos

and anomie in American life, but he grieves over them
" (Eder, Richard 1978, 146).

One of the many tantalizing themes that *Buried Child* deals with is the quest for identity. The play presents three generations in a single family; the grandfather, who isolates himself from the outside world, the confused son, Tilden, and the grandson, Vince, who comes back home but never finds any warm welcome as he expects. All the characters seem to suffer from both physical and emotional disabilities. In this regard, Mel Gussow comments

"Each character in Buried Child searches for a lost identity. How do we know who and what we are? The play itself is coming from out of nowhere. Actually it has its roots family as an ideal" (Cassow, Mill 1979, 15).

When he moved from California to New York, Shepard experienced the sense of searching for an identity, and suffered the loss of connection with the natural world. Using American myths to explain the world around him and to explore the causes of contemporary American malaise, Shepard proceeds not like a modern scientist but like a witch doctor who relates illness to the world of myths. He stated that "myths speak to everything all at once, especially to emotions" (Doris, 34). What is stimulating about Shepard's plays is the use of myth, the feeling that one enters a world at once beyond rational comprehension and yet utterly familiar. Shepard says that a myth:

"Means a nous of anonymous and not essentially a conventional method. A character for me a complex of different inscrutabilities. He's a strange entity" (Rosen, Carol 2004, 34).

Shepard makes the audience believe in the unexpected because he conjures it out of every ordinary thing. In *Buried Child*, he sets up his audience to follow the tantalizing clues that he exhibits, undercuts the audience's expectations and frustrates their ability to resolve the play realistically or symbolically" (Richardson, Jack 1980, II). Despite the incomprehensible behaviour of Dodge, Tilden, Vince and other characters in the play; the audience will be encouraged to search for realistic expectation. What is notable about Shepard's plays is that he never puts resolutions to the mystery that hangs over his plays because he dislikes resolutions in the theatre (Shewey, Don 1997, 116).

The Family Members' Disintegration.

The family in *Buried Child* suffers from the tyranny of the past, an act of incest happened decades ago, a truth half told that threatens the family members and "turns their tedious day to day existence into a nightmare" (Hart, Lynda 1987, 77). Incest, which serves to underline the hermetic nature of the world the play exhibits, is viewed as a basis of embracement. The family members, as a consequence of that incest, are powerless to improve any relations. They are isolated from humanity to avoid that dishonor. They even cannot cope emotionally with each other. They see no way out, either physically from the house or symbolically from their predicaments, so like caged animals, they tear each other apart. Christopher Bigsby finds out:

"Shepard is concerned with the failure of relationships, with the sense of removal from other people, from rooted surrounding, and from the self. This sense is a central concern of a writer whose plays explore the American psyche at a time of failed dreams and lost visions. It became clear that his is an America that has lost touch with its own visions, in which myths have become fantasies, family units have been collapsed, languages are broken, and metaphors pulled apart" (Bigsby, Christopher 2002, 7).

It is evident that the cohesion of the family is shattered. It is a world in which men and women are no longer sure of their real roles. The father has become a cynical old man who spends his days staring at a television screen, gazing numbly from his sofa where he continuously sips from a whisky bottle concealed beneath the cushions. His wife, Halie, living in a private world in her upstairs bedroom as a refuge with her pictures of the past, claims to see the whole world passing by, yet all her attempts to preserve the illusion of a happy family are distorted. Likewise Tilden, the eldest son and a former all American fullback, has returned to his family after long years of absence seeking refuge and warmth. Such is the family situation when Vince, the grandson, arrives with his girlfriend, Shelly, yearning to see a Norman Rockwell-Poster of the past and to reunite with his family after six years of absence" (Rockwell, Norman 2012). It seems that the arrival of the characters, increases the tension among the family members as they try to discover the secret that binds the family together in a fearful union.

The skeletal set of the play provides a gloomy and grim atmosphere of a family living in a house with "fraged carpet", a sofa and faded yellow lampshade, a television that produces no sounds or images. The darkness that

swings over the family represents the emotional state of the family which is unstable. Dodge says that:

"it's not raining in California or Florida or the race track. Only in Illinois. This is the only place it is raining. All over the rest of the world's bright golden sun shine" (1. p 22).

The center of the story in *Buried Child* are Dodge, the patriarch father, and Halie, who live seemingly in the similar house but are in fact separately. The image of the patriarch, "collapsed" father and the alienated mother produce the image of the "spooky" son; the third character type in the plays of Shepard's family. This ghostly son is full of despair and is unaware of his own fate. Forcefulness seems to be his only way of dealing with others (Nibras, Jawad Kadhem, 2008, 186). He is the victim of his father's abandonment of the familial role and the mother's triviality to her responsibility as a mother. In her article "Ties of Blood", Lanella Daniel states that the father in Shepard's plays is the only one who brings "curse" upon his family through his withdrawal from them. Likewise, it is the mother whose maternal role renounces the curse brought by the father.

The various perspectives of the family members imply two needs: the first need is to maintain the illusion of their innocence by moving away from reality and what happened in the past; the second is the need to live as strangers, to insulate themselves against the sense of shame which lurks everywhere in their house. Halie, like Amanda in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, finds refuge in the past. She lives upstairs in a room full of old photographs about a bygone golden age in which "everything was dancing with life" (I. p. 14). The past for Shepard is "something you can deny, but you can't escape from. It is a memory that as you grow older, it looks a lot larger" (Shepard 1982, 2).

Dodge's view of reality is different from Halie's. He chooses to live in a perpetual present in which memory is shut out. For him the past holds dangers that always shout out. Dodge does not want to be reminded of the past. He does not want to talk about anything. He also does not want to talk about his predicaments that occurred more than thirty years ago (II. p, 25).

Since the family members see things differently so resolution is impossible. What really threatens the family is the sense of loss, anxiety and tension (Hooti 2011, 87). All the family members are confused and out of association with the realism of life. Their tension is the straight consequence of misplacing authenticity and it reaches its highest point whenever the buried child of the title is mentioned.

As far as the family is concerned, the father is passive. He is a cruel man who tries to negate the new growth's opportunity. His drinking is an attempt to deny the memory of the past. He is divested by the family's dishonesty; therefore, he neither trusts his wife nor his sons. His mistrust is reflected in his paranoiac behaviour because he still suffers from the emotional wounds inflicted by Halie. He feels that some harm may befall him from anyone of the family.

The emotional estrangement which makes the conversation impossible among the family members contributes to their inability to sustain any relationship. They hide secrets as they cannot trust each other. Tilden's past, is a secret which no one of the family knows about and when Dodge asks Tilden about the troubles he had experienced in New Mexico, Tilden never gives answers:

"Tilden: you should be anxious ". "I didn't do anything".

"Dodge: Then why should I have worried about you?"

"Tilden: Because I was lonely... lonelier than I've ever been".

"Dodge: Why was that?"

"Tilden: (pause) Could I have some of that whisky you got?" (1.P.18-19).

Dodge, on the other hand, is always indifferent to Halie. Though she tries to reunite with him, he rejects that and his rejection comes from his desire to be away not from Halie, but also from himself. And when she asks him what he is watching on T.V, his responses are not clear:

"Halie's voice: Dodge, Are you watching baseball?"

"Dodge: No.

"Halie's voice: What are you watching?" You shouldn't watch anything that gets you exited! " (I. p 12).

From these vague responses one can feel how painful is the relationship among the family members. They suffer from self and social alienation because they lack the ability to find any positive values. The matter of social alienation in American families was discovered by Miller. He argues that:

"the world we live in is an alien place.

I should like to make the bold statement that all the plays we call great, let alone those we call serious are ultimately involved with some aspect of a single question. It is this "How may man make of the outside

world a home? How may man make for himself that vastness into home?"(Miler, Arthur 1996, 85).

Autobiographical Elements: Father-Son Relationship.

Generational conflict has been a central theme for the dramatists. Fathers and sons fight for possessing the past and the future. It is a clash for control and a self-knowledge. As in his plays *The Holly Costly* and *Curse of Starving Class*, Shepard continues to focus on father and son relationship which seems to be an eternal struggle. It is a fight of the father to keep his son from obtaining supremacy. Dodge, the father who has fudged responsibilities for his family, is a menacing figure. Despite his weakness, he wants to control his family from his sofa where he is stuck.

The play includes autobiographical details and foreshadows the exploration of the author's personal experience. For the fact is that the father with whom Shepard had such a fraught relationship, was the source of violence and of disabling familial relationship. Dodge's character is compared to Shepard's grandfather who is mentioned in Shepard's *Motel Chronicles*, a collection of poems, prose and a reflection of his own life" (Bloom, Harold 48). It is clear that Shepard's feckless fathers were failures. They were men of violence and alcohol who withdrew from their families for good.

Some critics noticed the autobiographical aspects of Shepard's work. The image of the failed father re-appears through a number of his plays. He is presented as a man who embodies the split between domesticity and wilderness. The central issue of these plays is the inheritance the sons receive from a failed patriarch father. This is clear when Vince tells Shelly "I've gotta carry on the line" (III. p 70). He actually refers to the dysfunctional family history he is going to reconnect with. And when Dodge dies, Vince takes his place to be the sterile patriarch who will carry on that line.

Identity Crisis: The Search for Origins.

In terms of the search for origins, Shepard felt it was necessary to come back to his roots rather than avoid them. He decided that facing his roots might have been a key to find himself and to discover his past. In a draft of a letter to his mother. He wrote to his mother a letter telling her that he tried to escape ever since. He also told her that he had his responsibility to face things that he could not run incessantly (Clum, M. John 1980, 173).

Going to the land locations and to the family seem to have been motivated by a desire for a sense of rootedness and depth. Shepard's return to

California was a clear sign of his desire to rejoin his family. He believed that the family roles are often permanent and inescapable. He once wrote, "We all come out of each other. Everyone is born out of a mother and a father, and you go on to be a father. It is an endless cycle" (Bottoms, Stephen J. 1998, 154).

The important questions raised in *Buried Child*, are: Can home be a last refuge? Does the reunion of the family members offer a consolation for them? The sons who moved away from the family return home now. After years of separation, Tilden comes back home to the same place from which he escaped seeking for warmth. He tells his father "I didn't know what to do. I couldn't figure anything out" (I. p.25).

It is proved that Tilden could not function independently outside home. His dream of being united with his family is clashed with the father's desire to have his son away from him. When Tilden meets his family, he soon realizes that they are incapable of taking care of him. Dodge prefers to keep him away and says:

" Dodge: you are grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It is unnatural. There is nothing we can do for you now anyway. Couldn't you make a living down there? Couldn't you find some way to make a living? Support yourself. What'd you come back here for? You expect us to feed you forever?" (I. p 25).

Not Tilden's illusion about home and family is shattered, but also Vince who after six years of separation comes back home with his girlfriend, Shelly, to find warmth. When he meets the family, none of them can recognize him. Being angry, he says: "How could they not recognize me! How in the hell they not recognize me! I'm their son." (II. p 42) Vince and Shelly expect to find honour and to see America in its American apple pie setting or the outside of the house which is, as Shelly imagines. Yet they are disappointed by the strange manner of the family. Dodge, who swiftly becomes argumentative and abusive to the visitors, warns them not to cross the illusionary boundary he has drawn around himself by saying "stay where you are! Keep your distance" (II.p.44). Actually, this geographical isolation may indicate the emotional isolation the family suffers from.

Being so angry, Shelly asks Vince to move away saying:

"Can't we just drive to New Mexico? This is terrible, Vince. I don't want to stay here in this house. I thought

it was going to be Turkey dinners and apple-pie and that kind of stuff" (11. p36).

This shows the disparity between the real and the imagined. As all illusions about home and family are stripped away, the family has been turned into a battlefield where the father, mother, and sons are all fighting. It seems that the family can no longer provide an Eden like home, on the contrary, it reinforces the sense of alienation and isolation.

The characters in *Buried Child* are at odd with others. They are doomed to live restlessly outside their community, and estranged from the normal way of life. The sons cannot live within the compass of the home, until their efforts to run away from the household are useless. They return to the parent's home in times of crisis. Thereby they are not welcomed.

Decline of the American Dream.

Buried Child could be viewed as an attack on the economical society and the American Dream. This can be seen through the motive of sterility and the atmosphere of death and decay in the play which is portrayed as a modern *Waste Land*. Shepard views the rapid expanding economy of rivalry as the weakening of the American society as well as the American family home. He states that:

"What is the American Dream? Is it what Thomas Jefferson proposed? Was it what Martin Luther King proposed? Was it what George Washington proposed? I, don't know what the American Dream is. I don't know it doesn't work, the myth of the American Dream has created extraordinary havoc, and it's going to be our demise" (Shepard, 6).

In *Buried Child*, Dodge is unable to plant the land "there hasn't been corn out there, I planted corn out there since about nineteen thirty five! That is the last time I planted corn out there", he states. (I. p. 17) Dodge drowned and buried the child that came out as a result of the act of incest. That act destroyed the family and stopped Dodge from planting crops in the field. He withdrew from his natural way of living to spend most of his time in smoking, drinking and watching television from his old sofa.

The mythic scheme of the play is reinforced by the allusions to the Arthurian legend of the Fisher King that was mentioned in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Dodge is the dried up monarch on his throne-like sofa, and to the

lack of fertility in the land is related to the loss of vitality in the family, can idea related to the fact that Dodge's sons cannot bring a new life to the land (It is also viewed that both Dodge's sons are usurpers; this is suggested when his youngest son, Bradley, pushed him off his sofa, and when Tilden seduced his wife. Dodge describes life in the old days as a kind of American Eden: "The farm was producing enough milk to fill Michigan lake twice over" (111. p. 64) Then the family fell from grace, as he claims, because of incest and murder. "Everything was cancelled by that one mistake, that one mistake" (111.p.65). Actually this defect symbolizes the inner psychological conflict that has shaped the character's lives. In this regard, Susan C.W. Abbotson gives her point of view (Abbotson, C.W. Susan 2005, 163).

Dodge prefers rigid boundaries that keep everyone in the family away. He seals himself off from the outside world, and is satisfied to waste his days inside the house. He wants distance between him and everyone else. Tilden, like his father, isolates himself from the public view when he argues that "*I'm not going down there into town*" (I. P 19). Before he dies, Dodge recites his will to hand over the farm to Vince. And when Dodge dies, Vince immediately takes his place on the sofa / throne. He lies down and assumes the same posture of his grandfather. The action of the play in the end moves toward ritual. It re-enacts the sacrificial death of the corn king, here represented by Dodge whose death provides the rebirth of the new king in the person of Vince.

Rejecting change, Vince will not flee from the pattern of the past which he has behold so evidently. The play suggests a pagan sense of inescapable doom (162). For the family is tied to the cyclical life of the land. After the death of the father, the new land comes to life. Halie is heard calling from upstairs window declaring that Eden has been restored. The land has mysteriously turned green "It is like a paradise out there. I never seen it like this" (III.P.72). As in the last moment of the play, Tilden enters carrying the muddy corpse of a small child. His entrance with the corpse like figure suggests fertility and progress. Darkness has been replaced by bright sun. The new growth of the farm suggests that death can be replaced by new life "It is a miracle, I've never seen a crop like this in my whole life (III.p.72) Halie says as Tilden makes his way up the stairs "may be it is the son. May be it is the son" (III.p.72). The sun brought out the corpse is echoed by the son in Tilden's arms. The bright sun which brought new life in the farm may suggest the end of the family curse. The dirt covered corpse of a child has been brought to light. It is always the dirty secret which the family has avoided and denied for years. Eventually, the play is a tale about the hold of the past upon the present, of sins, guilt, and retribution.

CONCLUSION

Sam Shepard is considered a post-modern American dramatist. He got a big reputation due to his living and famous works. Among them is *Buried Child* which reflects his tragic and tortured life. The play concentrates on the domestic problems that lead to destroy the ideal family. The family members in *Buried Child* are unable to build any relations. They alienate themselves from the society to avoid their father's shame. They, even, cannot mix with each other. They see no outlet either physically from the house or spiritually from their predicaments, as if they are like jailed animals since they tear each other apart. The play also sheds light on the moral deviation that is represented by the irresponsibility of the father who enjoys drinking alcohol. This is an indication to the modern man who does not care of the surroundings. Shepard's talent in drama is illustrated through dividing the play into three acts that refer to three generations in an American family. The careless father, his wife and sons are, in fact, apart. The outcasted father and the alienated mother produce destroyed sons who are full of despair and unaware of their own destiny. The father is passive and cruel man who tries to deny the possibility of the new growth. His addiction to alcohol is an attempt to forget his duty towards the family. Thus, the play shows the negative impact of the political crisis and wars on the American individuals and their dream "American dream", which cannot be fulfilled.

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