



SAM SHEPARD'S PLAYS AS NOTHING BUT POIGNANT PICTURES OF THE MORAL, PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL DISINTEGRATION OF 'AMERICAN FAMILY' AND AMERICAN LANDSCAPE' IN THE POST-WAR YEARS

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Abstract

This paper attempts to assess the moral, physical and emotional disintegration of American family and American Landscape during post-war years in Sam Shepard's play and, shows how he beautifully depicts rich variety of cultural concerns, and his central subject is the American family, added to it, he tries to bring out the reality of life in the twentieth century through American Life style. Sam Shepard's plays bring out the familial relation, the connection to the outside world, the parenthood roles, etc all these bring out the cultural mutation.

Key Words : Emotional Disintegration,Culture,Identity,American Family,Society.

In the words of Maya Koreneva, "American dramaturgy is entirely a child of the 20th century, although the first dramatic works appeared in the New world at the end of the 18th century" (P 143). However, the post-war American theatre did start on a high note, with the resurrection of O'Neill's 'flawed' masterpieces and the New plays by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. But with 1960's the American Theatre entered a period of ferment leading to a decadence of the existing drama and theatre. Renewal could only come from the newly aroused off-Broadway. Albee became the dominant playwright of the 60's. The next logical step was off-Broadway which was marked by the rise of a large number of theatre groups who performed in any place any play of any size. Even in 1951, an Avante-garde group established the 'Living Theatre' and performed. European and American modernist professed to picture forth the fragmented society. 'The open Theatre' of New York was an outgrowth of the 'Living Theatre'. Joseph Chaikin left the 'Living Theatre' in 1963 and began his own group 'The Open Theatre' But the 'Open Theatre' closed ... the 'Living Theatre' died C.W.E. Begs by observes:

"once more the search began for a new
Saviour in the American theatre to succeed
Edward Albee, now dismissed by most critics
and reviewers. New playwrights duly emerged" (P 356)

Among them, Sam Shepard is considered a playwright of genuine originality and at the same time truly a representative of contemporary America. As a prolific writer, Shepard began writing one act plays at the age of 20. No doubt, he has been various things at various times – song writer, actor, race – track handy man, member of the touring rock pop group, film-maker, horse breeder, etc. It is thus he brought a rich and varied experience into the making of his plays which picture forth both the landscape and inscape of the complex American scene today. Sam Shepard can likely he called a unique playwright for his highly individualized manner. Even in his life, one can observe some shadow or flavor of uniqueness, or unusualness or elected difference. By the time when he reached the age of 24, he did his first full-length play, *La Turista* and from then on, he kept turning out romance one-actors and full-length plays at the rate of almost a year. When he reached the age of 35, he won. The Pulitzer prize for *Buried Child* (1978).

In the Fall of 1974, Sam Shepard came to the United States, selling in San Francisco Bay Area where he found both artists and the creative climate he sought to renew his theatrical experimentation. He brought together musicians and actors thereby improving 'character development' which might evolve directly from music and sound. For Shepard, both language and music gave substance to the insubstantial. Plays such as *May Dog Blues*, *Back Boys Beast Bait*, *Operation Sidewinder* and *Cowboy Mouth* employed musical numbers between and within scenes as "emotional comment" upon the characters and the stage action. In *The Tooth of Crime*, Shepard



combines language with music, introduced not in the form of songs alone but as a mood-evoking backdrop to the spoken speeches;

“The movement towards musical enhancement of language in order to create a sort of verbal incarnation seems a logical step for Shepard, who once described his use of language as experimentation that led to rhythm discoveries in space and time ... packing up words and stretching them out along with their size and shape and sound” (De Rose 234).

When Shepard began work with actors and musicians at the magic theatre in San Francisco, his experiments built upon the symbiotic blend of language and music that has been the strong suit of *'The Tooth of Crime* but with *Inacome*, Shepard abandoned the hard, pounding rhythms of rock-and role for the more fluid, hypnotic qualities of improvised jazz. Shepard had been exposed to Jazz all his life.

Sam Shepard's plays are typically American, depicting the dreams, aspirations, failures, success, beliefs of the word's superpower's ordinary people. He had his own ideas of the American Predicament and the world predicament. He believed that he should use new dramatic devices and methods to portray man against the predicament. Shepard says that he is interested not in ideas or message but in 'theatrical events'. But this does not hide the artist's deep probe into fundamental issues of contemporary America, notably the spiritual dissolution of the family, the corruption of the artist by commercialism, the disintegration of American dream, the vanishing western frontier and its culture at all. His major plays of the late 1970's and 1980's are domestic dramas and they portray how the working class families are victims of self – perpetuated violence, guilt and abnormal fantasy. His earliest plays *Cowboys* and *Rock Garden* had formed the first production of Theatre Genesis. From one – Actors, he soon moved on to fill-length plays, the first of which *La Turista* (1967) was produced at the American place Theatre. Sam Shepard was only twenty three years old. When this play was performed. The reviewer Elizabeth Hardwick felt “caught up in the violent energy of a new work” (Frutkin 67). Speaking about the characters in the play, she says, “The essence of their being is energy, verbal energy” (P 68).

The full-length play *La Turista* is in the same style and voice as his early one-act plays. The emotion evoked in everyone of these plays is fear. It represents the paranoid fear of destruction that was prevalent in the 1960's. America was at war and there was the possible ability of a nuclear holocaust. Each play is an allegory of America's collective behavior in the 1960's. Faced with a society that suppressed the awareness of danger, Shepard, like many other writers, turned to apocalypse as the only way to describe the turmoil of American life in the 1960's. Since Biblical times, apocalypse is meant, among other things, social chaos, fruitlessness, war and worldwide disaster. Writing the early plays when his country was mired in a foreign war and when racial and generational conflicts threatened to destroy the fabric of American life, Shepard justifiably presented pessimistic visions of impending doom. What we see in the one – acts as a “coolness” - an absence of beliefs, affective actions and strong relationships –actually belie the feeling of betrayal, the grief about America that surfaces completely in the bitterness and hunger for peace in *Operation Side Winder* (P 77). *The Rock Garden* which is Shepard's first extant script, shows pictures of the utter tedium and boredom of a typical American family. It is a stifling, barren, inert existence, devoid of meaning and purpose.

Shepard's concern with family deserves mention. In *Fourteen Hundred Thousand* (1967), one sees a limited domestic tension, that between husband and wife. Then in the 1970's the full strength of the curse on the family is seen in *The Curse of the Starving Class* and *Buried Child*. And in the 1980's intense – intra – family conflicts and passions are seen in *True West*, *A Fool for Love* and *A Lie of the Mind*. All these present poignant pictures of the moral, physical and emotional disintegration of the family in the post-war years. The American dream of the



integrated family has gone up in smoke and disintegration and destruction have war taken every aspect of existence. Brown writes:

“When Shepard went on to write *La Turista*, *Operation Side Winder* and *Mad Dog Blues*, it becomes obvious that his primary interests were the myths and Archetypal figures of America, but the focus on America though not yet full blown is clearly evident in the early plays” (P 76)

It is true that Shepard’s subject matter in America and its everyday life. In Play after play, one comes across American myths and American archetypal figures. But one also finds every ancient myth belonging to the old civilization of Sumer, Egypt, Greece and Scandinavia. The mother of Icarus, in *Icarus’s Mother* is Gaea, the mother earth of the archaic Greece pantheon. But whatever he borrows from outside is given a local name and habitation. Shepard starts with an image or picture and he gets the audience to see the picture. It is what Michael Smith calls ‘Gestalt theatre’. The image may mean one thing to the playwright and another to the audience. This is not of any significance. What is important is that both suffer the same emotion. The emotion in America of the 1960’s was fear, fear of death and destruction of decay and disintegration.

In his plays, Sam Shepard makes brilliant use of myth, metaphor and music. He borrows myths from all cultures – Greece – Roman, Judeo – Christian, ancient American and popular folk myths. In play after play, he makes use of incest based on Greco – Roman legends and themes borrowed from the Garden of Eden myth, the Cain – Abel myth and the great myth of the American dream. He knows that the myths operate on levels other than the purely rational and it is these other levels that he as a dramatist tries to capture and communicate to the audience. He defined myths as,

“a sense of mystery and not necessarily a traditional formula” (P 74).

one therefore comes across the traditional and public myths overtly or covertly in his plays as well as many private myths some accessible, but many inaccessible to the audience. It is at this preconscious or subconscious level that a whole world of desires, lusts, images, myths etc., exists in a world in which Shepard is specially interested. In the world of the unconscious, the laws of coherence, of cause and consequence, of linear progress of events and actions, do not operate. It is the dramatist’s attempt to present this irrational world, that makes his plays appear surrealistic and obscure. Being a musician, Shepard has a fine ear for the melody of words and rhythm of utterances. The result is that many of the speeches have an incantatory effect on the audience. This is evident in the earlier plays which have long monologues. The short speeches in his later plays read like gnomic verse and sound like catches or snatches of music. In some of his plays, music is the beginning and end – all of the compositions. In his works like *Melodrama play*, *Mad Dog Blues* and *Tooth of Crime* music plays an important role and triggers the emotions of the audience. Hardly stark and still mythic, *Curse of the Starring Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1978) and *True West* (1980), are realistic in setting, straight forward in plot and coherent in plot. The plays have been called American gothic and they may also be Shepard’s attempts at Greek tragedy. He himself speaks of them as a ‘family trilogy’.

To conclude, the world that Shepard dramatizes in his plays is protean; it changes its shape. It is typified by dynamism or perhaps entropy that he sets himself to capture. His work seems dominated by a sense of loss, but equally by a desire to identify and even urge a return to consonance.



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