

DISINTEGRATION AND DEVALUATION OF AMERICAN FAMILY: SAM SHEPARD'S *BURIED CHILD*

SUDARSAN SAHOO

Assistant Professor of English, Parala Maharaja Engineering College, Sitalapalli, Berhampur, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

Sam Sheppard entered into the theatrical scenario of American family during 1960s. But he began as a high modernist involving him with bizarre experiments which were staged in tune with other. He launched his family plays by the mid seventies when the American family system had undergone an inversion of the traditional values. His own family life did not offer a congenial situation of an integrated family life. His father constantly absconded from the family responsibilities and worked as airman. Shepard had to fly away from his family but he was under the care of his lonely mother. One day, his mother with whom he did not pull on well, boozed anvil and killed himself in the road accident.

This one-parent-family and his autobiographical experiences have been reflected in his realistic plays which were otherwise called as *Family Plays*. Sam Shepard was the recipient of the Pulitzer prize for the 'Buried Child' the fourth play on his realistic oeuvre. The present study, based on the status of family in the dramatic world of Sam Shepard, demands of an investigation into the quality of family in America during the 1960s. The play projects the animosity and turmoil in the relationship between the members of the family.

KEYWORDS: Impotence, Hostility, Violence, Mistrust, Bitterness

INTRODUCTION

The word family has been derived from the Latin word *familia*. Of all human groups, family is the most important primary group. It is a small social group consisting of man, woman and their children. One can say, it is a miniature of social organisation, consisting of at least two generations, and is characteristically formed upon the blood bond. Family is the universal institution found in every human society. It has been the subject of perpetual interest for artists, scientists and social scientists. Scientists and sociologists examine the family as a complex social phenomenon and approach. Artists examine family not just for its external structure, but for all those sentiments, emotions, sensations, attachments and sacrifices which is the base of the psychological family.

The American family depicted in early American literature did not show any signs of erosion. The American literature portrayed flourishing, booming and happy families. But in the late 19th and 20th centuries, realized that there was a virtual image of the American family. The American family is not what it once was. In times gone by, the family in America had assumed a status in the society which entails more than the ordinary concept. It is often seen as the harbour around which social order and stable governance resolves. The family entity, conventionally, has been considered as a sanctified institution and symbol, not to be questioned or attacked. For the Americans, the family has been a source of real happiness. They have been truly proud of their family unit because it was a part of the great American myth which in pioneer days played a lasting and vital role in the development of the nation. But, today, the concept of the family is being

seriously questioned.

The writers tried to find out the reality behind the show off. This exploration exposed the superficial veneer of the family's harmony. It seethed a vast store of clash, quarrel, conflict, discord, rejection, aggression and violence. Love, fondness, warmth and affection-the nitty-gritty of family, were conspicuous by their absence, resulting in strained relationship among the family members.

Sam Sheppard's *Buried Child* elucidates the theme of enmity, lonesomeness, seclusion emotional barrenness and erosion of the family. The play represents the disintegration of American family in the context of disappointment and disillusionment with the American mythology and the American dream. It also represents a middle class family breaking up pieces because of unfaithfulness and disloyalty. The play is the reflection of what was happening all over America. It is a microcosm of the society in its persuasive depiction of the dysfunctional family bond.

In the *Buried Child*, Dodge is the husband of Halie. Once upon a time, they were established. They had a farm. It was producing enough milk. Everything was settled with them. In the meantime, Halie got pregnant. They were not planning on having any more boys. The suspicion of Dodge developed because they had not slept in the same bed for six years. Dodge felt quite upset. The child wanted to be a member of the family. It wanted to grow in this family. Dodge could not bear these things. So, he killed the child. He buried the child. The play is entitled as *Buried Child*. Dodge expresses his anxiety:

We could let a thing like that continue. We could not allow that to grow up right in the middle part of our lives. It made everything we had accomplished look like it was nothing. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. (P-124)

This is a precarious situation of the family. Dodge kills the child and buries it without a slightest hint of hesitation in his mind. The innocent child is the gift of the God. It is a mere instrument of suspicion, jealousy, intense conflict of family. It is lost from the world because the family lacks understanding, judgements and consideration.

Halie is an image of immense frailty and foul. She is expected to lead the family in a proper direction. As a result, there will be a perennial source of peace and pleasure in the family. She is not quite affectionate for her husband. The play starts when Halie addresses her husband devoid of affection. She praises her son in a manner which agitates her husband. Dodge does not respond her. For her, Ansel is very smart. She is the smartest child of all her children. She tells father Dewis:

He was a hero. Don't forget that. A genuine hero. Brave, strong and very intelligent. Ansel could have been a great man. One of the greatest. I only regret that he didn't die in action. It is not fitting for a man like that to die in a mortal room. A soldier. He could have won a medal. He could have been decorated for valour. I have talked to father Dewis about putting up a plaque for Ansel. (p-13)

This is a reflection of values of the family at the verge of destruction and decadence. It is a family full of pretension and fashion. The mother loves, praises, fondles her son not to nourish him as a true American with immense intelligence and dream. She projects him as a man hailing from conflict and chaos from the family life.

Sam Shepard, a playwright of artistry and insight, presents the terrific and turbulent actions of a mother. The mother is an incarnate of Goddess. She is kind, considerate and compassionate for her children. The family flourishes with the motherly love and affection. The family devastates with motherly jealousy and discrimination for her children. Halie is

reacted when Ansel loves a catholic lady. She does not tolerate it. She demands the love of Ansel for her. Ansel is married with the catholic lady. Halie aspires the death of Ansel. Ansel is died when he is with her wife at the honeymoon. She pretends to her husband that the catholic lady murders Ansel. She has not murdered .She comments passionately:

Of course, he'd still be alive today if he hadn't married into the Catholics. Themob. How in the world he never opened his eyes to that is beyond me? Everyone around him could see the truth. Even Tilden .Tilden told him time and again. Catholic women are devil incarnate wouldn't listen. He was blind with love. Blind. I know. Everyone knew. The wedding was more like a funeral. You remember? All those Italians. All that horrible black, greasy hair. The smell of cheap cologne. I think even a priest was wearing a pistol. When he gave her a ring I knew he was a dead man. I knew it. As soon as he gave her ring but then it was a honeymoon that killed him. The honeymoon.(P-74)

Shelly, an outsider, enters into the family. She is the boyfriend of Vince. She tries to investigate the pros and cons of the family affair. She feels that each member of the family is leading a tense life. She supports to Dodge. Dodge is anxious to reveal the secrets of the family. Bradley is seriously angry with Shelly. He thinks Shelly as a woman from the Police Department. Bradley is a snob like his mother. Halie does not listen what Dodge speaks. She tries to prove the words do Dodge as false. But Dodge is very strict on it. She moves to upstairs when Dodge starts speaking. But Dodge threatens her to listen it from everywhere. She has to pay the penalty. Bradley is angry .If he had a leg, he would have stopped him. His wooden leg is in the hand of Shelley. Doge points out the lacunas of Halie to Bradley mockingly. Bradley is under the control of Shelley. She is the symbol of impotence. The mystery of the family is clearly evident when Dodge speaks out to Shelly:

Dodge-You're not huh? Well, that's good. Because I'm not either .See, we were a well-established family once. Well established. All the boys were grown. The farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over. I and Halie here were pointed towards what looked like the middle part of our life. Everything was settled with us. All was to do was ride it out. Then Halie got pregnant again. We were not planning on having any more boys. We had enough boys' already. In fact; we had not been sleeping in the same bed for six years.

Halie-(moving towards stairs) I'm not listening to this! I don't have to listen this!

Dodge-(stops Halie) where are you going? Upstairs! You'll just be listening to it upstairs! You go outside; you'll be listening to it outside! Might as will stay here and listen to it!

(Halie stays by stairs)

Bradley -If I had my leg would never be saying this. You'd never get away with it if I had my leg.

Dodge-(pointing to Shelley) she's got your leg. (Laughs)She's gonna keep your leg too. (To Shelley)She wants to hear this .Don't you/

Shelley-I don't know.

Dodge-Well even if ya' don't gonna tell ya'. Halie had this kid. This baby boy. She had it. I let her have it on her own. All the other boys I had the best doctors, best nurses everything. This one I let her have by herself. This one hurt. Real hurt. Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. I wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wants to a part of us. I wanted to pretend that it was his father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even everybody around us knew. Everyone. Al our boys knew. Tilden knew.

Halie-You shut up! Bradley, make him shut up!

Bradley-I can't. (P-124)

CONCLUSIONS

The mystery is unravelled from the intense hostility of the husband-wife. The animosity is amply exposed. The stability and strength of the American family is deteriorated and disintegrated because the devaluation of the family system.

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