



Familial Disintegration: A Study of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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Abstract

This paper tries to assess the various reasons of crisis which lead to the fragmentation of family. It also focuses on identity crisis, masculinity crisis, lack of belongingness, search for roots, association with past and witnesses distorted relationship between father and sons. It also analyses the incest and infanticide which causes accumulative destruction of family. It depicts how various reasons or causes such as: Incest, Infanticide, loss of identity, domestic violence, traumatic effects, Alcoholism and escaping from reality contribute to the crisis on an individual and family. According to Sam Shepard, the act of incest has destroyed the whole family and leads every character in the play towards crisis not only at individual level but also within family. This article portrays how the characters suffer throughout their life and how their life becomes absurd and meaningless because of past sins and escapism from reality. Apart from this, Sam Shepard concentrates on the pungent, gloomy, and horrifying legacy that one generation passes to another. *Buried Child* is full of exploration of family guilt and betrayal, conveyed by a complex web of symbols. It unravelled an unspeakable family secret involving incest and infanticide.

Keywords: incest, family, infanticide, destruction, morality, crisis, identity, alienation

Introduction

Buried Child is a three act play and has an enthralling plot. It pivots around a spiritually and physically dejected Midwestern farm family. It is the second play among Sam Shepard's family trilogy and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1979. *Buried Child* turns to be a milestone for Sam Shepard and encapsulates all that is best about his combining of realistic family drama with larger mythic patterns. In this play Sam Shepard concentrates on the pungent, gloomy, and horrifying legacy that one generation leaves to another. According to Susan Abboston, "The play is also a mythic exploration of family guilt and betrayal, conveyed by a complex web of symbols" (*Thematic Guide to Modern Drama* 50).

The play opens with Dodge, head of the family who is lying on the couch half asleep and drunk. He is a sedentary cougher, gets relieved only by television and whiskey. Halie, Dodge's wife is an aging flirt, who has an extramarital affair with the local clergyman Father Dewis. Tilden, the eldest son is a mentally retarded and middle aged who has recently returned farmstead from jail. Bradley, Halie and Dodge's other son is vicious and crippled with one leg but powerful, full of sexually destructive energy who does not live with them but visits occasionally.

As the play proceeds, Tilden's son Vince comes home after six years with his girlfriend Shelley to meet his family. Halie welcomes them at home, but no one except her appears to know Vince. His grandfather, Dodge, and his father, Tilden, refuse him of any relationship. However, after their arrival an eccentric and horrible secret from the family's past is revealed. Halie and her elder son Tilden have an incestuous relationship, with the result of that Halie gives birth to a child, a baby boy. The child is drowned and buried in the yard

behind their farm house by Dodge. This act of incest and infanticide destroys the whole family. Dodge has stopped working on his field and indulges in drinking and smoking. After unveiling the family's past evil secret, Vince leaves the house to buy a whiskey for his grandfather Dodge, but he himself comes back drunk and enters the house violently, crashing the front door and hurling the empty whiskey bottles. At the end of the play, Tilden digs up the corpse of the dead child from their field and comes home to show his mother Halie. Dodge is lying dead on floor. Vince covers his dead body, puts roses on Dodge's chest and then, wearing Dodge's cap, lies down on the sofa in the same position as Dodge used to and appears to have inherited family house. The play ends as Halie sees the corn outside, the miracle of the vegetables' growth, like paradise.

Buried Child unfolds three generations of a distorted American family. It portrays unconventional behaviour and faults that embody inner psychological defects and traditional conflicts in characters' lives. They show both the emptiness of their lives and the void of their contemporary culture, as Stephen Bottoms remarks, "Seek to create and recreate their personal appearances. Many of them manipulate an ever-shifting series of roles and masks, thereby, suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of the self" (*The Theatre of Shepard: States of Crisis* 15).

At surface level, it is a story of passing the family legacy which undergoes through the periods of degeneration and regeneration. At the mythic level, it tells a family story of incest and infanticide, which drives the older generations to forsake their responsibility, and bequeaths a legacy of emotional sterility that the younger generation requires to identify, comprehend, and transcend. It resembles to the Greek

tragedy as it reflects themes of human suffering such as incest, murder, deceit, and rebirth. David J. DeRose points out:

Again, Shepard borrows from the classical Greek family myths, incorporating such archetypal narratives as the Oresteian homecoming, oedipal incest, the battles of fathers and sons, as well as patricide and infanticide. *Buried Child* also exhibits a particular indebtedness to Henrik Ibsen's modern family classic, *Ghosts* (1881), both in its narrative pursuit of a dark family secret and in its thematic preoccupation with the revelation of the son's true identity and spiritual inheritance. (*Sam Shepard* 99)

Sam Shepard uses the old myth of incest in *Buried Child*. He portrays incestuous relationships between the members of the family. This poignant act of incest has destroyed the whole family and leads every character towards crisis not only at individual level but also within family. Incest shatters the American dream of happy family in the play. American dream is fallen because of self-perpetuated crisis in characters and the family. Henry Schvey states that Sam Shepard commented on the idea of family and said:

What doesn't have to do with family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean? Even a love story has to do with family. Crime has to do with family. 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's an endless cycle. (*The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* 111)

In contemporary American society, Sam Sheppard portrays the disintegration of the American family and posits the American culture a mere humiliation and spiritually and morally degenerated. He presents America as a self-centred, barbaric and hypocritical nation, where people care little for each other and are indulged in physical pleasures and domination over others. In *Buried Child*, Sam Shepard depicts the breakdown of familial relationships in their structure and value. About the family in the sixties, he says:

...The family was no longer viable, no longer valid somehow in everybody's mind. The 'nuclear family' and all these coined phrases suddenly became meaningless. We were all independent, we were all free of that, we were somehow spinning out there in the world without any connection whatsoever, you know. Which is ridiculous. (67)

In American family, the male is considered the breadwinner, the caretaker and the main source of income for the family and the female (wife) is considered the back bone and responsible for maintenance of family. But in this play spiritual immorality has left them opposite of it. They fail in their roles. James Wilson on family disintegration Says, "The American people believe that this nation is on the wrong track, not because it is constitutionally ill-founded or economically backward, but because its family life is deteriorating" (*Posterity Lost: Progress, Ideology, and the Decline of the American Family* xi).

In *Buried Child* every Character at individual level as well as

in family faces identity crisis, masculinity crisis, lack of belongingness, search for roots, association with past and witnesses distorted relationship between father and sons, because of incest and infanticide. Every single character except Shelly, Vince's girlfriend, is suffering from identity crisis which has caused internal and external crisis. In this regard Annette J. Saddik writes, "Deal with the fragile boundaries of identity and the impossibility of locating an authentic self-outside of the roles, masks, images and performances that mark human action" (*Contemporary American Drama* 131).

Identity crisis is extensively explored in *Buried Child*. As Esther Harriot states, "*Buried Child* continues Shepard's obsession with identity" (*American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews* 12). The play is about the struggle between creativity and destruction. Shepard is working with the themes of home, family, heredity, and environment; as he moves into the exploration of the self in relationship to others. The image of identity crisis is encompassed by the character of Vince, grandson of Dodge. He goes through an identity crisis at home. Vince leaves his home six years before and has created a new identity for himself in New York. When he returns home, he is not recognized by anyone, even refused by his grandfather, Dodge and father, Tilden to have any flesh and blood relation. Vince tries to convince his grandfather, in which he is not successful. At home, instead of gaining an identity, he loses his identity that he has gained for himself in the New York. Vince is firmly bent on to regain his lost identity. To meet his urge of identity he needs to prove his origins but is denied of having any bond of flesh and blood with his father, Tilden and grandfather, Dodge. After a complete denial of any relationships, he becomes baffled and in frustration he cries, "How could they not recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognise me! I'm their son" (Sam Shepard: *Seven Plays* 97). Shelly becomes perplexed by the etiquettes and ambience of the Dodge family and sporadically begins to acknowledge the rejection of Vince. She asks questions to Tilden about Vince to know his identity.

Tilden completely fails to recognise Vince and leaves his identity an unsolved mystery. Shelly loses hope and tells Vince to leave but Vince implores her for more time to know his family. In despair he starts blaming and questioning himself of having committed any unpardonable offence. He considers himself for misfit of a family. He opines his view as, "I have been known to plunge into sinful infatuation with the Alto Saxophone. Sucking on number 5 reeds deep into the wee, wee hours"(97). In order to establish his identity he starts repeating his childhood tricks in a hope that it will help in regaining their memories. Shelly makes a sarcastic comment on the family members regarding identity when Dodge beseeches them to get a bottle of whiskey for him. Shelly asks Vince, "SHELLY: Why don't you get him a bottle. Vince? Maybe it would help everybody identify each other" (94). At the end of the play, Vince is successful in establishing his identity only when he resorts to violence. He returns home drunk after an overnight sojourn, suddenly becomes violent and starts screaming and smashing empty whiskey bottles at the wall.

Almost all the characters in this play are struggling with their

identities. They have different identities at different times. Dodge seems to have stable identity but changes his identity from a responsible man to a sofa ridden drinker; Halie indicates that he used to be different. Halie's identity is bit confused, she is a wife of Dodge but both are estranged. She turns to be religious but at the same time has an affair with the father Dewis. Tilden says that he used to have feelings of being self but that has been destroyed. When Vince comes home he calls Tilden:

VINCE: (reentering, to TILDEN.) you want anything, Dad ?

TILDEN: (looks up at VINCE.) Me?

VINCE: Yeah, you. Dad. That's you. (98)

It shows that Tilden is struggling with his identity as a father. Shelly is the only character who is sensible and has an intact identity. However she is also affected by the family demeanour and loses her sense of identity as she no longer recognizes herself and says: "I don't even know what I'm doing here" (121). Incestuous child's identity is more confused than anyone. He is the son of Halie and Tilden, Halie is also mother of Tilden; so the child is born as a son as well as grandson to Halie and son as well as brother to Tilden. He is also born as a grandson and stepson to Dodge and uncle as well as brother to Vince and so on.

The crisis of masculinity entails the breakdown of the primary pattern of the conventional norms of masculine mannerism. Dodge remains the centre figure of the play not because of his domination as a character, but because of his stagnation and physical weakness, which makes him mere vocal and dependent on others. His deteriorated status in the family is reflected by his usually used words for himself "an invisible man" (63). His physical destruction is wrought on him by Halie's marital infidelity. He was once a lucrative dairy farmer but an incest relationship between his wife and son has changed him forever and has deeply hurt him. This view of masculinity has also been voiced by Sam Shepard himself. He has said, in regard to American violence, which he genders as male:

...There's something about American violence that to me is very touching. In full force, it's very ugly, but there's also something moving about it, because it has to do with humiliation. There's some hidden, deeply-rooted thing in the Anglo male American that has to do with inferiority, that has to do with not being a man, and always, continually, having to act out some idea of manhood that invariably is violent. (*New York Times* B26)

Dodge notices that his dominance has moved to his wife, Halie, and younger son, Bradley. Halie denies him of his manhood and reminds him of her past and current love affair with Father Dewis. It displays Dodge's masculine instability and in ability. However at the end of the play Halie throws flower (a rose presented by Father Dewis to Halie) onto Dodge which shows Dodge's impotence and emasculation. Dodge's disrespect is not only by his own attitude but also by the activities of other family members. He has not only lost his masculinity before woman but also before man. When

Dodge comes to know from Halie that Bradley is going to cut his hair, in threat he says, "You tell Bradley that if he shows up here with those clippers, I'll kill him!" (67). His powerlessness is also evident when he himself is unable to resist.

Besides all this, Dodge's "hair is cut extremely short and in places the scalp is cut and bleeding" (83). It symbolically represents the emasculation of Dodge's dominant role in the family affairs. Moreover, Bradley takes his father's couch and blanket which strips his father's leadership and masculinity within the family. Dodge's effeminacy is explicit when he thinks that some harm will befall him if he falls asleep. The role of Dodge in his family is mere a vocal figure, as he reminds his son that he is still his father. Tilden also struggles with his position. On one side he is not aware of his fatherhood and on the other side he is harassed by his younger brother Bradley and does exactly what his younger brother wants him to do. Hence, it shows both the fathers lack their positions and masculinity.

Buried Child is a play about confrontation. The characters are placed in a severe battle in which they must face with the truth behind life in America. This battle reveals the realities hidden in their lives. Shepard profusely portrays the images of violence in *Buried Child*. Almost, all the male characters are indulged in acts of violence because of hiding past secret. In Act One, Bradley behaves in a violent manner while giving Dodge a hair-cut. The act of sprinkling corn husks on Dodge and the brutal haircut are very annoying, violent images. In Act two, the violent image of father is displayed when Tilden narrates the story of an infant murder to Shelly.

This brutal act of drowning an infant is a violent image that remains fixed in the minds of audience. Tilden tells Shelly that Dodge is responsible for the murder of the infant which is poignant. In the end of Act two, Bradley is seen frightening Shelly. Shelly is threatened and horrified at the behaviour of Bradley. The vulgar act of putting finger into her mouth by Bradley is an attempt to violate her modesty. Bradley often frightens people by exploiting their weaknesses. Shelly wants to help Dodge, but Bradley wants to kill his father from the beginning as he wants to take the control over Dodge's family.

In Act three, Dodge confesses his guilt and tells about cold-blooded murder of the infant in front of everyone, he says to them, "I killed it. I drowned it. Just like the runt of a litter. Just drowned it" (124). By the end of play Vince gains his recognition and identity only when he has resorted to violence. He enters smashing through door, drunk and hurling liquor bottles on the floor.

Vince inherits the traits of power, domination, and violence from his grandfather Dodge and Uncle Bradley. The images of violence is also explicit when Vince pulls out a big folding hunting knife and cuts a hole into the screen big enough to climb through it onto the sofa, smashing Bradley onto the floor. Moreover, his violent and an aggressive posture are seen by pushing Bradley's wooden chair out of Bradley's reach to show his hostility towards him.

The aftermath of incest deteriorated the marital relationship and also leads family members towards alcoholism. Bereft and lack of communication between Dodge and Halie is the first step towards marital chaos. As the Act unfolds, we hear the sound of Halie's voice that comes from the top of the staircase

and Dodge is heard coughing in paroxysms. Halie does not discern and pay heed that it is more because of long swig he takes again and again that too in a secret manner. There is no openness between the two of them which is a detrimental factor as it shuts the door for a fruitful conversation to take place, thus ruining the family's atmosphere. Although, Halie is guilty of having an incestual relationship; on top of that she is trying to make overtures to clergyman. It seems there is something more between them that lies hidden than meets the eyes. When Vince consistently asks his grandpa as to where Halie had gone, Dodge makes a pertinent remark, "Don't worry about her. She won't be back for days. She says she'll be back but she won't be. (he starts laughing) There's life in the old girl yet! (stops laughing)" (87-88).

Shepard leads this crisis to apex by adding a clergyman's episode in which Halie and Father Dewis enter into a deeply spiritual conversation while they are very much under the influence of alcohol and thus gives an extra dimension to the whole issue. It generally reflects the immorality and corruption of priesthood. Shepard's intention of introducing a clergyman in this episode appears rather intended. It is a sad interpretation on the clergymen — an example of the blind leading the blind. They make entertainment when they get a chance and also on the next day would give a glorious sermon on the virtues of abstinence. This is a mark of total ignorance and debauchery. Despite Halie's Incest, her illicit relationship with Father Dewis intensifies Dodge's frustrations. He resorts to continuous drinking in order to drown his feeling of melancholy. The frustration that Dodge faces turns him a diehard cynic. Dodge reacts very violently and abuses him in a filthy manner, when Halie tells Tilden to clear the mess before Bradley's arrival. It triggers off an emotional outburst from Halie in which she recounts the mental makeup of Dodge and how she detests him. Dodge handles to escape the darts of allegations hurled by his wife. He is an artful dodger and always takes a sip or two and hides the bottle of whiskey under the sofa before anybody could observe it.

In this play, the curse of alcohol and denying reality has ruined the whole family. Dodge drinks from a bottle and hides it from Halie, and Tilden drinks from same bottle and empties it when Dodge goes to sleep. When Halle and Father Dewis returns slightly drunk from a lunch, she puts her hand into the clergyman's pockets for a silver flask and serves Shelly some whiskey. Later, Vince comes back wildly drunk and breaks empty bottles in a reckless manner. Besides this at the end of play, family manages to recognize the identity of Vince only when he is in a drunken state and behaves in a very violent manner after spending a whole night in a pub.

Everyone in this family argues over minor things to avoid facing the big issues, including their own failures and complicities in relation to incest and murder. Covering themselves or each other with blankets or coats symbolizes that all are complicit in hiding from the truth and each other. This family so engrossed in guilt and so corrupted that all the family members have lost the power to communicate on a daily basis. Halie's infidelity and Dodge's drinking have greatly contributed to the crisis of this family, and they bear the brunt of the guilt. Dodge's denying reality, is a picture of ill health, showing how the repercussions of guilt wears a person down until there is hardly anything left. Halie's

emotional estrangement from her family is shown both by what she says and by the fact that she regularly speaks from offstage, creating a vast distance from her family. Denying reality in *Buried Child* is a deep psychological crisis leads to dreadful disasters on the individual and the family.

To sum up, it is about a single family in which discordance puts the whole family life in a state of complete confusion and disorder. Sam Shepard extensively explores different themes which lead to crisis and it reaches to its climax in this play. In this play, he portrays the working class family, which is victim of self perpetuated violence, guilt, and abnormal fantasy. Barnes remarks about this play as, "Shepard makes a searing indictment of the American family, seeing it as a destructive unit rather than a supportive one" (*Best American Plays Eight Series 1974–1982* 156) [2]. Sam Shepard shows us the incest and infanticide which are considered as universal taboos and are the reasons which lead to crisis of confrontation among family. Sam Shepard depicts a life which is completely shattered and how violence takes place. He also portrays the inability of American individuals to face reality and carry out their roles in life.

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