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Disintegration and devaluation of american family: Sam shepard's *buried child*

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Abstract

Shepard's *Buried Child* represents a middle-class family breaking up and going to pieces because of unfaithfulness and disloyalty. The family depicted in this play is an anxious family with one son dead, second son- an amputee and third a nit-wit. The play is in fact, a reflection of what was happening all over America. The play becomes a microcosm of the society as a whole in its persuasive depiction of the dysfunctional family bond.

Keywords: Family, Institution, American dream, American literature, Erosion, Disintegration

1. 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 social organisation, consisting of at least two generations, and is characteristically formed upon the blood bond. The American Bureau of Census defines family as a group of two or more persons related by blood, marriage or adoption, and residing together; all such persons are considered as members of one family. It signifies that biological relations as well as social relations are important in a family. Members brought into the family through adoption are very much part of it.

Family is a universal institution found in every human society. So, 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 it as a foreseeable external state of affairs, substantial, concrete and hence objectively provable. 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 content of family.

So, family forms the basis of all human endeavour and doings. It has been found to exist at all times and all levels of culture. It remains the most important single institution in the lives of almost all people. Families are not secluded islands, isolated and unaffected by the society in which they exist. Instead, family is a peculiar human development, regarded as a universal, social institution.

In times gone by, the family in America had assumed a status in society which entails more than an ordinary concept. It is often seen as the arbor 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 unity 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.

However, 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, insightful writers, however, realized that this was a virtual image of the American family. The American family is not what it once was. The writers tried to find out the reality behind the show off. This exploration exposed that underneath the superficial veneer of family's harmony, seethed a vast store of clash, quarrel, conflict, discard, rejection, aggression and violence. Love, fondness, warmth and affection- the nitty-gritty of the family were conspicuous by their absence, resulting in strained relationships among the family members.

The disintegration of the American family, as a basic social unit, occurred as a result of significant socio-economic changes which had a deep impact on relationships within the family. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the industrial and commercial progressed

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technological advancement registered its impact on American social life. It proved to be disastrous for normal functioning of human personality. Most of those functions which the American family used to satisfy are now satisfied by various commercial and state operated institutions like crèches, kindergartens, schools, trade unions, clubs, hostels, and restaurants. The disintegration of the family has been hastened by free sex relations made possible by changing notions about morals and by birth control techniques. With the decline of religion, the religious sanctions behind family and marriage have also vanished, making dissolution easier to obtain. The changed notions about the status and role of women have also aided this break up. Individualism is now the basis of American culture. Individual happiness is often possible only at the cost of the family as a whole. Divorce, looked at from the individual's point of view, is a safety valve which prevents strains and saves an individual's happiness.

The present paper will examine Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*, focussing upon the theme of enmity, lonesomeness, seclusion, emotional barrenness and erosion of the family. Sam Shepard was born on November 5, 1943. He is an American playwright, actor, and director. He has written several books of short stories, plays, essays and memoirs. The play, *Buried Child*, first presented in 1978, has been written by Sam Shepard. He received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1979 for this play. *Buried Child* represents the disintegration of the American family in a context of disappointment and disillusionment with American mythology and the American dream. The play is divided into three acts.

Act One

The scene begins with a conversation between Dodge and Halie about their son, Ansel who was murdered years before, allegedly by his insane wife on their wedding night about Bradley, another son, who is an amputee that comes and cuts Dodge's hair forcefully while he sleeps. Halie, dressed in mourning, then leaves to church and tells the third son, Tilden, to take care of Dodge. When Tilden enters, Dodge accuses him of stealing from a neighbour. Dodge and Tilden then begin to discuss Tilden's past- they speak of how he got into trouble in Mexico, and also about his failure to leave the home for starting a new life. Tilden is a mentally ill. While sitting close to his father, he shucks corn into a bucket. When the conversation between the father and the son ends, Dodge falls asleep. Tilden, before going outside, covers his father's body with the corn husks, as if he is covering with a blanket. After that, Bradley enter and shaves his father's head while he sleeps.

Act Two

The scene introduces Vince and Shelly. Vince was going to meet his father, Tilden but decided to stop over at his grandparent's home on the way there but was astounded when he had entered the house because Dodge failed to identify Vince at all. Shelly thought that they had entered the wrong house and tries to convince Vince to leave but he doesn't move. Tilden then enters the room but Tilden doesn't recognize Vince. Dodge then ordered Vince to buy him alcohol and he does. In his absence, Shelly talks to Tilden about Vince but she realized that Tilden was unable to recognize Vince. Tilden talks about his son with his mother but he believed that the baby was killed by Dodge and he buried the child in the backyard. Then, Bradley re-enters and starts harassing Shelly by sticking his hand in her mouth.

Act Three

In this scene, Dodge informs Shelly that Bradley is one-legged, so she need to fear him, as Dodge thinks that Vince has run somewhere and Shelley is left alone. Thereafter, Halie enters along with Father Dewis, with whom she is having an extra-marital relationship. Halie then begins an argument with Dodge and Bradley and they exchange some harsh words until Shelly intervenes. In aggravation and frustration, Shelly grabs Bradley's wooden leg and expresses her anger with the whole family and with Vince. Father Dewis then tries to down her temper. Then, Vince returns in a drunken condition and says that he has to stay at the farm house with his family. Dodge and Halie then recognize Vince and Dodge hands him the ownership of the house and land. Shelly then leaves the house and Vince. Vince then throws the wooden leg outside the house and Bradley goes crawling for it. Father Dewis also leaves their house. The play ends with Dodge's death and Vince places a blanket and rose on him. Halie then begins to yell out that corn has bloomed in the backyard while Vince sits motionless. In the final scene Tilden is shown walking around the room with the corpse of a baby in his hands.

This drama appears to have come full circle, the buried child emerging to replace the father who murdered him. While Shepard's drama deals with the basic problems confronting the American culture in the contemporary times, Christian symbolism and the development of Christian themes in an aspect of the play that intensely describes the context of Shepard's output. This play focuses on the insinuation to return of the prodigal son, the spiritual stagnation and the vegetation myth. The plot of this play can also be viewed as a modern version of the central theme of western mythology that of death and rebirth of Corn King. In this play, Shepard ties the regeneration of long barren corn fields to the resurgence of the young boy who was buried between the rows some forty years ago, having been murdered by Dodge, the family patriarch.

This play makes the emptiness of conventional Christianity clear right through. This is not the religion that can bring out the miracle of a renewed American dream. The characters in the play display lack of devotion, faith and spiritual weakness and inability. The emptiness of this kind of religion is echoed by the emptiness of the American culture. The family in this play lived a droning still life from which there seems to be no getaway. Shepard suggests the possibility of returning to an America that was once brawny, held promises and nourished its people. This return, however, is possible only when America's reality is confronted squarely, when the crimes of the past are accepted and atoned for and the young can be enlisted to understand their responsibility for the recreation of the dream.

Conclusion

As long as the family exists with love, with its agreements, deals, ethics, principles and morality, it continues to be a training ground for the young mind. When unresponsiveness, apathy, coldness, selfishness and egotism set in, it destroys family life. Parental indifference, indifference and apathy towards their children results in the degeneration of the family. The above analysis of the play indicates that the American family, today, is in a serious sociological plight. Shepard, however, refuses to bemoan at the condition America has come to. Even if one feels he is mourning, he is fighting against this erosion in the American family life.

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