

Sam Shephard as an Unacknowledged Legislator of the American Way of Life Projecting the Degradation of Social Values in the American Family System

V.Manikandan

Ph.D Scholar (PT), Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University

Abstract- This paper examines how has been an actor on the earthly stage even since his first appearance on earth due to the fact that he is assigned by powers temporal and supernatural, the vote of a human being with a special focus on man's concern of action and his dramatic role in his joys and agonies, suffering and torture, and in the powerful interplay of his strong passions of love, friendship, hatred, cruelty, jealousy and revenge for which Sam Shephard's work has been chosen because he was considered to be an unacknowledged legislator of the American way of life projecting the degradation of social values in the American family system

Index terms- legislator, degradation, actor, earthly, appearance, temporal, supernatural, Manifestation, joy, agony, love, friendship, revenge

INTRODUCTION

Man has been an actor on the earthly stage even since his first appearance, because he is assigned by powers temporal and supernatural, the vote of a human being. His main concern, therefore, has been the action of some kind. Through countless centuries, this dramatic role of man has found its manifestation in his joys and agonies, suffering and torture, and in the powerful interplay of his strong passions of love, friendship, hatred, cruelty, jealousy and revenge. If he has been a slave of circumstances, he has also waged a relentless war against them. His action has found expression in his numerous conquests, failures and frustrations. In playing this varied human role, he has acted both with heroic nobility and cowardly meanness. The tragedy of modern man is seen in the works of such notable, dramatists as Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Eugene O' Neill and Sam Shephard. The modern man who has been the hero behind all the wonderful achievements of this age and who has

performed such miraculous feats in the field of science and technology seems to have lost his heroic stature. The victories he has had over Nature and the god-like powers he has acquired only helped to limit his freedom of action. He is a strangely claimed being in an age of individual freedom and democracy. In spite of his seeming greatness, he is oppressed by the weight of his own intellectual victories. Human life today has become so complex that great moments of heroism in modern man's life have become too rare. It is a sad truth that modern man's life is endowed with more ugliness and less beauty. He seems to have diminished in stature. As a product of his environment and the society he lives in, he has not only lost his moral strength, but has also become a victim of the general human condition prevailing around him. He is oppressed by the weight of his own guilt and debasement, on the one hand, and the false ideals and wrong values upheld by his society, on the other hand. It is this image of the degraded modern individual that is discovered in the plays of Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, O'Neill and Sam Shephard, of whom Shephard stands foremost in portrayed of family ties, human relationship, alienated self and social exploitation.

In the dramatic world of Sam Shephard, family life is like all life, violent and contradictory, shaped by long-suppressed forces and dark secrets. Though the fields of the family farm may be

"green lush wet dripping corn bacon and tomatoes the size of your fist, inside the house there are fist fights across the table brother fights father and wife fights father son fights sisters brother fights the priest"
(Mottram 133)

The environment is binding and imprisoning, with the characters wrenched between the demands of

socialized conduct and the curse of more primitive, natural behaviour. In such an environment, the members of the family devour each other in relationships based on exploitation, alienation and lies.

The six powerful family-centred plays of Sam Shephard deal mainly with the image of fathers who run away from their families, for the fathers do not like to be with their children and wives. The family members especially the children want their fathers to be with them but the fathers do not mind them at all. There is a yawning gap between the children and the fathers. All the fathers in the six plays are painted with the same brush: they are distant, selfish, weak, gloomy, pessimistic, manipulative, tricky and above all, churlish. All of them are invariably alcoholics who escape to the desert for a solitary life and their sons suffer a lot mentally for they feel helpless and some of them become extremists in one way or the other, even in opposing their fathers. Feeling wounded, the abandoned sons cannot think of filial duties when their fathers are far away from their responsibilities. Sam Shephard portrays this kind of strange fathers in the six plays. In each play, the father – son relationship is marked by conflict and mystery. Son murdering his father, son attacking his father are pretty casual in these plays.

The family – centered plays are *Curse of Starving Class*, *Buried Child*, *Fool for Love*, *The Rock Garden* and *A Lie of the Mind* which have autobiographical as well as confessional elements of the playwright, Sam Shephard. The quarrelsome relationship between Sam Shephard and his father began even when Sam was a child. In his adolescence, the conflict became much more serious. Sam Shephard was haunted by the unresolved ties with his family, personal heritage and especially with his father. Shephard began to feel that there would be no redemption for his eternal problem with his alcoholic and escapist father. It always remains a scar in Shephard that he did not have a father in the real sense. To Shephard, his father was a stranger. Shephard's father was a pilot in the Army. Air corps in Italy. During the Great Depression, his father lost the family. He was terribly wounded and emotionally disturbed. As a result, his father look to drinks. He abruptly left the family and chose the live in the desert since life there was detached. Shephard now and then would go to the desert to meet his father. Shephard was full of

bitterness and disgust towards his father. The relationship between Shephard and his father was still estranged even after the death of his father. When he was asked whether he felt sorry over the fated accident of his father, Shephard said thus:

“My relationship with him is the same. Exactly the same. It’s relationship of absolute unknowing. I never knew him, although he was around all the time. There’s no point in dwelling on it. I mean my relationship with him now is exactly the same as when he was alive” (Schvey 14).

Whether Shephard's father was alive or not, did not make any difference to him. His father was a myth in a negative sense of him. He longed for his father's love. Shephard always wishes his father to be around him, but he was not available. His ill-will for his father never diminished but only increased. Shephard's father miserably failed to shower his fatherhood on his son. So Shephard led a fatherless life throughout his life, even if he had a father around him all the time. That Shephard's father was so is only a specimen sample in American families. This is true especially of the twentieth – century American fatherhood. The American fatherhood during the twentieth century is full of complexities and mysteries:

There act alienated. The seriousness of the relation “To understand twentieth century fatherhood is to understand what men have shared and where men have differed, to comprehend not only change over time but the interplay of class, race and ethnicity in men’s lives”

The fatherhood in America in the 20th century comes to such a pass because of such causes as the World War II, the Industrial Revolution, the worst consequences of the Great Depression, changes in the household economy, cultural changes, family politics and even feminism. These are the reasons why the American fatherhood in America became impeachable and problematic. The individual result of the Industrial Revolution is the painful suffering of working-class fathers. The fathers spend most of their time at the factory, office and store. Owing to this, the fathers are not able to find time to be with their children. As a result, the children of such fathers feel separated and they become mentally disturbed. The fathers too feel the same way. A big gap is formed between them. Soon this gap becomes a creek in the

relationship between the fathers and children. The son even becomes mentally ill when his father is like this. There is no happiness in the family at all. Unable to stand this, the fathers become despondent. They feel like running away from their families many run away to lonely places rather unmindful of their wives and children.

Cultural variation is one of the important factors of deterioration in the American fatherhood. A large number of immigrant fathers are settled in America. They are suspended between an old culture and a new one. The immigrant fathers suffer from crisis of values. In a nutshell, the fathers and the sons are often at the crossroads. As a result, they are often loggerheads. The fathers and the sons become avowed enemies and they get alienated. The seriousness of the relationship is evident from the following passage:

“Survey and psychological data from throughout the twentieth – century suggest that such father-son alienation remains a defining characteristic of American family life” (Griswold 3)

Sam Shephard wrote powerful family-centered plays more akin to Tennessee Williams and William Inge. *Curse of the Starving Class* is about an impoverished southern California ranching family on the verge of losing their home, their land and their way of life. *Buried Child* is a home-coming mystery about the violent and incestuous family secrets of three generations of Illinois farmers. *The Rock Garden* is about Shephard’s feuding family. *The Holy Ghostly* is a quarrelsome father-son play. While the tone, settings, themes and characters of these six family-centered plays vary, one dramatic element that remains unchanged in each is:

“the autobiographical presence of a young man haunted by unresolved ties to family, father and personal heritage” (Derose 91).

In *Curse of the Starving Class* it is not just the father’s ghost who refuses to die but also a family curse, an inheritance towards violence which is found in the son, just as in the father-Like the unseen forces at work on Shephard’s characters, this curse is generated eternally. The curse is powerful, yet invisible, imposing itself upon the characters, in the play without their consent. And, without their consent, it turns them against each other, so that the curse of Shephard’s starving class family is to be

locked in battle: clinging to each other for life, yet fighting for death. *Curse of the Starving Class* starts in the wake of an act of domestic violence. The play opens to the family’s teenage son, Wesley, cleaning up the pieces of a broken door. The previous night, his father, Weston, had arrived home drunk to find that the door to the house had been locked against him by his wife, Ella. In an intoxicated rage, Weston battered down the door with his body, then disappeared. The next morning, as Ella enters the kitchen to make herself some breakfast, Wesley starts describing the events of the previous night as he experiences them from his bed: Weston’s violent attack upon his own home and his terrorizing of his wife and family are both literal and symbolic destruction of the protective circle of the family. He not only violates their safety, but by virtue of his absence as father and protector, he leaves them open to attack and invasion from others. Wesley is particularly sensitive to this sense of defenselessness, for he clearly wants to open himself to his father, but in doing so, he risks devastating emotional violence.

In *The Rock Garden*, son vehemently opposes the father; the abuse is about a sexual narration. In *A Lie of the Mind*, son kills his father. *Buried Child* portrays incest between mother and son. In *Two West*, two brothers try to exploit each other for sheer survival. In *Fool For Love*, sister and brother fall in love with each other. There are no moral values in Shephard’s American family life. The realization of the absurdity of the human condition is a necessary step towards understanding the freedom and responsibilities of man. And it is only through the confrontation of false values, such freedom can be achieved. False values in life should be eradicated. This is emphasized by Bigsby. He says:

“Modern society has detected itself from fundamentals and has created a new system of values by which the pursuit of material wealth and technological efficiency have come to replace basic human needs. These new values console man with the feeling that he is progressing, but make him neglect or deny fundamental forces of his inner life which are then turned into forces of destruction” (P 73)

The problem of modern man trapped in the midst of a success society that upholds false ideas are of universal significance. It is this predicament of man

as a victim that has attracted the attention of modern American writers. Sam Shephard's plays are timely utterances on the predicament of man in the urbanized world of today.

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