

The Disintegration of family: Analysis of Sam Sheperd's *Buried Child*

R. Kalai Arasi,
M.Phil Scholar,
Dept. Of English,
St. Joseph's College of Arts and Science for Women,
Hosur.

Abstract:

This paper analyzes the various reasons which pave the way for disintegration and fragmentation in a family. It also points to the reason for disintegration. The characters shown here are completely absurd alienated from society, psychologically affected, lack familial bond. It also depicts how a man addicts himself to drink to get rid of all the problems he was about to face in society. An act of incest has totally collapsed the familial integration and as a reward of such an act, all the family members suffer from the beginning to the end.

Keywords: incest, loss of identity, immorality, lack of bond

Man is a social animal, bonded with love, care, and affection. When a person fails to realize this there arises familial issues which normally lead to disintegration in the family. American dream seemed to be a failure one here. It was thought that Americans led a great family and their myth played a greater role in the development of their nation. But today the term family is greatly questioned.

The late 19th and 20th-century writers gave a clear cut picture of American society. There was a loss of bond in a family, which leads to fragmentation. More people seek for divorces and it's hard to say that the relationship between father and daughter, mother and son and the relation between members of the family increased. A free sex relationship ruined the culture of America. America was considered as religiously stable, but Sam Sheperd denies the quote and showed the true state of America in those days. This state is all because of changes in society, people started running after money and normally their materialistic mind shut the door of their heart.

The dream of America seems to be failing here and Henry Schvey states that Sam Sheperd commented on the idea of family and said,

What doesn't have to do with the family? There isn't anything, you know what I mean?
Even a love story has to do with a family. We all come out of each other – everyone is born out of a mother and father. It's an endless cycle. (The Cambridge Companion to Sam Sheperd 111)

The present paper analyzes Sam Sheperd's *Buried Child*, he was born on November 5, 1943. He is an American playwright, actor, director and he had written several plays, essays, and memoirs. The play *Buried Child*, first presented in 1978 has been written by Sam Sheperd. He received Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1979 for this play. The *Buried Child* projects the immorality act, which leads to the family disintegration and how the family members suffer for their own sins. The play is divided into three acts.

The play opens in rural Illinois in 1978. It was raining then, and a sick man Dodge in his seventies was sitting in a couch staring at a television. He makes sure that no one is watching him. Then he took a whiskey bottle under the couch and started drinking and then he hides it. This setting symbolically represents the lack of prosperity and a decaying family atmosphere of the American family."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 rain reminds of Biblical flood as a punishment. Dodge starts coughing on hearing that Halie his wife started blaming him. She also started blaming rain as it was the main reason for Dodge's illness. Dodge ignores all these and he started drinking and lights the cigarette. This scene states that the couples were not bonded and they want to avoid each other.

In America, the male was considered a caretaker and he is the person who is absolutely responsible for the welfare of the family in all materialistic needs, and a women a backbone of a family. Here both Dodge and Halie fail in their familial 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).

Halie then informed Dodge that she is going out to see minister Father Dewis. She also informed that their son Bradley will come in short to cut his hair. But he doesn't want Bradley to cut his hair and was expecting Tilden their eldest son to cut his hair. In the meantime, Tilden enters with a handful of fresh corns. Dodge questions asking him from where he got that. Tilden replied that he picked it from their fields out back. But Dodge replied that there were no corns in the backfield and he wants Tilden to return it from where he got that. Halie unaware of Tilden's presence was lamenting that he was not going to take care of them. Halie further says that their son Bradley accidentally cut off his leg with a chain saw. Both Tilden and Bradley are shown as they were not suitable heirs or suitable sons to look after their aged parents. Dodge from the beginning was shown as a drunkard but he was a good farmer his wives incestuous act own son spoiled their life. The view of masculinity is voiced by Sam Sheperd himself. He has said, in regard to American violence, by the male genders.

...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 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*)

Their only hope is Ansel, their younger son. But soon it is informed that he was also dead in a motel room. Then Dodge with his wooden leg enters the room and started shaving his father's head. The family members act was shown in a great mystery and there was no bond or integration among the members of the family. Son shaving the head of his father seems to represent a prisoner shaved before execution or a sheep before slaughter. Stephen Bottoms remarks, "Seek to create and recreate their personal appearances. Many of them manipulate their ever-shifting series of roles and masks, thereby, suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of the self" (*The Theatre of Sheperd: States of Crisis 15*).

Rain continues here. The act of alienation and lack of bond among the members of the family is shown strangely in the first act. This illustrates the family life of America in the 1960s and 1970s. After head shave Dodge is shown asleep on the sofa, his scalp was bleeding because of short hair cut. Here Vince twenty-year-old youngest son's entry is shown. He left his family six years ago and now he returned home with his girlfriend Shelly, who is nineteen-years-old. Shelly greatly admires the farmhouse settings and moreover, she compares the house to Norman Rockwell painting. But Vince was explaining the real tense situation of the family, as he returned after six years.

Vince was looking for members of the family and he went upstairs. Shelly found Dodge in his couch. When Vince came downstairs finding no one upstairs, Dodge couldn't recognize his very own grandson. Here Vince suffers an identity crisis. Esther Harriot states, *Buried Child* continues Sheperd's obsession with identity" (*American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews 12*). He further gave information that Halie will come after a few days. Dodge start commenting on Shelly's appearance, that frightens her and she forced Vince to leave the house at once. Every single character except Shelly is suffering from an identity crisis. Annette J. Saddik writes, "Deal with the fragile boundaries of identity and the impossibility of locating an authentic self-outside of the role, masks, images and performances that mark human action" (*Contemporary American Drama 131*) By that time Tilden enters with a handful of carrots. Again it's strange here that Tilden couldn't recognize his own son Vince. Vince was in a confused situation and don't know how to remind him. Dodge in spite of all these started asking for an alcohol and again started commenting on Shelly's physical appearance. When Tilden asks about Vince, Shelly refuses to give any information. Then Tilden says that he also has some secrets that he too can't reveal.

Tilden tells Shelly that in those days he used to go for adventures, but now he can't. Shelly expects more information from him. He reveals a long-hidden secret of their family that a baby is buried in their backyard. It was hard to know that the baby was born for Tilden and his own mother Halie. And it was Dodge who buried the child but now he himself doesn't know where the baby is buried. Dodge was trying to stop him but he fell down when he tried to stand up from his couch. Then Bradley enters the scene and started questioning Shelly, who she is. And he wants the fur to cover Dodge's head which Shelly offers to Tilden.

When we analyze this act there was a failure of sentiment in the family. Dodge's head was bleeding as his hair cut was short. This shows that no one was there to care for him. After Vince arrival also the home smoked in full of confusions, and that even his own father and brother failed to recognize him. The only positive character revolving around the scene is Shelly, her nature of frankness and softness made Tilden open up the secret. The growth of carrots in the backyard shows the possibility of flourish. The story passes through various periods of generation and regeneration. At the mythic level, the narrative tells about incest and infanticide in the family.

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

Again, Sheperd borrows from the Oedipal incest, the battles of the classical Greek family myths, incorporating such archetypal narratives as the Orestean homecoming, the battles of fathers and sons, as well as patricide and infanticide. The 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 Sheperd* 99)

Then Halie enters the home with Father Dewis, with whom she is having affairs. Halie begins her argument with Dodge and Bradley and they were blaming each other. Shelly interferes and tried to stop them, as they didn't stop her from grabbing the wooden leg of Dodge and throwing it away. Vince enters there in drunken state and says that he had to stay with his family. Here Dodge and Halie recognized him. Identity crisis is extensively explored in *Buried Child*. As Esther Harriot states, "*Buried Child* continues Sheperd's obsession with identity" (*American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews* 12). Vince after leaving his home, he went to New York and there he gained a personal identity for himself, but when he returned home after six years his own father Tilden and his grandfather Dodge couldn't recognize him. Here Vince loses his own identity in his family itself. After a complete denial of all the relationships in frustration, he cries, "How couldn't they recognize me! How in the hell could they not recognize me! I'm their son" (*Sam Sheperd: Seven Plays* 97). In this play he portrays the problem of

working-class people, Barbes says, “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]

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