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Identity crisis and its negative effects on individual and familial integration in Sam Shepard's
Buried Child

Abstract

From the ancient nation's literature to the modern world literature, identity crisis has been one of the outstanding themes in literature. The post World War II era is considered by critics as the era of unspoken classifications, festering clashes, and hidden kinds of dissatisfaction and revolution. When the World War II ended many American soldiers rejoined their society while suffering from psychic pain. Modern American drama, especially "Absurd Theater", considerably covers identity crisis and its effects on both individual and social levels. When American society became increasingly fragmented in the post war years it was mirrored in a fragmented theatre by an increasingly introspective and highly ambiguous drama. Americans' identity crisis is widely depicted in Sam Shepard's dramaturgy. This paper explores identity crisis in Shepard's *Buried Child*. It illustrates how Shepard dramatically portrays postmodern American's dilemma with the paradox of American identity crisis and how the characters' identity problematic issues contribute to the familial disintegration and dissonance of the postmodern American family.

Keywords

Identity crisis, American frontier, the ideal of masculine success, familial disintegration.

Introduction

In general, *Buried Child* is considered an extension of Shepard's theatre and postmodern American theatre that depicts twentieth century problematic American family which started with O'Neill as Tom Scanlan observes "From O'Neill on, our [serious] playwrights have been obsessed with the failure of family harmony and with family disintegration"(Scanlan 49). Despite the scientific and technological achievements of postmodern time and the positive changes that the American society has witnessed in all fields as the products of postmodern era, there are drawbacks of this era. Postmodern era has not only affected the Americans' surrounding environment, but there have been great changes in social, familial and individual values, relations and identities. These transformations and changes in the prevailing values, relations and identities cause what is known as national, social and individual "identity crisis".

Identity crisis is a central theme in American drama. As Richards states in his book, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic*, regarding identity: "IN MANY WAYS, IDENTITY IS BOTH THE OLDEST AND THE NEWEST theme for American writing and culture." (Richards 1). American dramaturgy portrays Americans as fragmented between their true and false identities. They are fragmented between the past and present. They are lost between the lifestyles of the Old West and the New West. Carla J. McDonough states in her study, *Staging Masculinity: Male Identity in Contemporary American Drama* (1997), in the 20th century masculinity is represented through two conflicting ideals. The first ideal is "the ideal of masculine success". It represents the man who adheres to the ways, ideals, and the style of life of modern American society. The second ideal is "frontier ideal of masculinity". It represents the males who look for freedom and adventure of the cowboy lifestyle. In other words, this ideal represents the life of the Old West, the image of the macho man which is a recurrent theme in Shepard's plays (47).

Shepard's dramatic characters are plagued by their struggle to establish their identities. They are wavering between the national, social and individual values and identities of the "American frontier" and the "ideal of masculine success". They are portrayed as entrapped between the traditionally irretrievable and non-existent values, relations and identities and the inaccessibly current set of values and identities. They can't identify their true selves with either the past or the present. They show their frustration and despair with their endless and fruitless search. Furthermore, they cannot abandon identity search till they achieve their self-

destruction instead of their self-realization. However, characters' fruitless and self-destructive search for their true identities negatively affects the integration and harmony of their families.

Discussion

Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* exposes the characters' dilemma with the paradox of American identity and their eventual self-destruction, meanwhile; it shares the themes of home, heredity, familial disintegration and dissonance of the American family with Shepard's family plays. When *Buried Child* was opened, an article for *The New York Times* was entitled "The Deeply American Roots of Sam Shepard's Plays," another "Sam Shepard's Obsession Is America" (Maufort 157). It is also an example of Shepard's postmodern dramatic style. The characters expose discontinuity, fragmentation of their roles and speeches. The external appearance of the characters' fragmented roles, speeches and identities indicates their psychological fragmentation. Abbotson confirms this: "The fragmentation of character and speech we witness signals the psychological fragmentation these family members experienced" (50). It dramatically illustrates how identity problematic issues leads to the disintegration and dissonance, breakdown of the modern American family.

All the characters, in *Buried Child*, cannot live out their individual and national American identities. Daronkolae and Hojjat state: "In *Buried Child* every single character except Shelly, Vince's girlfriend, is suffering from identity crisis which has caused internal and external malfunctioning including self-dilapidation and social alienation" (205). Moreover, the play destroys the hope of escaping American life and establishing a new identity beyond the boundaries of America. The attempt to leave American life is proved to be more self-destructive than living a deformed American identity. While Weston, in *Curse of the Starving Class*, puts much hope on escaping to New Mexico to start a new life and identity, *Buried Child* literarily clarifies how more dangerous for Americans to escape their identities throughout Tilden's character.

Tilden can neither establish his identity with the "ideal masculine success" nor can he identify himself with the "American frontier". Tilden is now in his forties. He is both a son and a father. He is the eldest son of Dodge and Halie. He was once a former all-American football player but he could not find his real self by adopting the codes and values of the "ideal of masculine success". Therefore, he heads to New Mexico, where many of Shepard's characters disappear or escape to identify themselves with the "American frontier". He stays

there for twenty years. He has recently "come into [his father's] house outta the middle of nowhere". He is now "burned out" and mentally ill after his return from New Mexico. However, Tilden returns from New Mexico with a total mental disorder to the extent that he is not aware of himself. Instead of paying attention to his parent and their farm, Tilden needs someone to care for him, he is a trouble for his parents and Dodge feels that they are responsible to take care of Tilden, Dodge tells wife: "You've gotta watch out for him. It is our responsibility. He can't look after himself anymore" (Buried Child 17). He "can't even protect himself". He is "so much trouble" (Buried Child 25, 26).

Tilden is totally unaware of his identity that he is a father and a son. He "now roams the property half-crazed"(Adler 14). He is a totally destructed character in the play by American identity dilemma. He expresses his loss in 20th century America, he says: "I didn't know where else to go. ... I didn't know what to do. I couldn't figure anything out."(Buried Child 36).Tilden's character shows that American identity cannot be evaded, nor can it be adopted and lived out. The Twentieth century American man is doomed to continue his fruitless search for his real identity till he meets his self-destruction.Due to Tilden's fruitless search for his real identity and the eventual self-destruction he encounters, his family has probably come to a more disintegrative state than his father's family. His wife is totally absent from the play. His son, Vince, has already left his grandfather's house and the farm to New York.

It is not only Tilden whose identity crisis and its negative impacts on his character and family were explored; obviously, the idea of identity crisis is widely examined in *Buried Child*. Vince undergoes a transformation process of his identity. He is the youngest character in *Buried Child*. He is in his early twenties from unknown mother. He has left the family to New York for six years. The idea of moving to New York and living there for six continuous years signifies that Vince has developed a new identity. An identity that corresponds with the "ideal of masculine success". The appearance of his girlfriend with him in his grandfather's house proves that Vince has adopted the values, images and codes of modern American life. However, Vince is not totally satisfied with his identity. He is in search of his roots and origins to enhance his feeling of his real identity. He has come back to his grandfather's house and farm trying to connect himself to his roots to gain a sense of himself. He searches for a connection with his past and memories, as Shelly explains: "I mean Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's a new thing with him. I kind of find it hard to relate to. But

he feels it's important. You know. I mean he wants to get to know you again. After all this time. Reunite. I don't have much faith in it myself. Reuniting" (Buried Child 47).

Vince's attempt to strengthen his sense of real identity by connecting to his origins and roots results in his despair. He is not acknowledged as a relative to the family, so he can't establish himself as a son and grandson within the context of his family. Dodge speaks to Vince: "Stop calling me Grandpa will ya'!It's sickening. 'Grandpa.' I'm nobody's Grandpa!" (Buried Child 54). He is neither recognized by his grandfather nor by his father which symbolically denies any flesh or blood connection. He tries to remind them of joint memories he had with them in the past but he never succeeds:

Look at this. Do you remember this? I used to bend my thumb behind my knuckles.

You remember? I used to do it at the dinner table ... Here's one you'll remember. You used to kick me out of the house for this one ... Both Dodge and Tilden take short uninterested glances then ignore him. (Buried Child 63)

Consequently, Vince's new identity, which he has established in New York, quickly dissolves. He begins to suffer a loss of identity. He is confused and bewildered about his relatives' inability to recognize him, he says: "How could they not recognize me? ... I'm their son" (Buried Child 65). He makes various attempts unsuccessfully to remind Dodge and Tilden of who he is. He fruitlessly entertains them as a child, hoping that this will help regaining their memories. He believes there is something hidden that has changed the family, he says: "I gotta find out what's going on here. Something has fallen apart. This isn't how it used to be. Believe me. This is nothing like how it used to be." (Buried Child 66). He justifies his belief by that his physical appearance has not changed considerably to the extent that his relatives can't recognize him. However, under the constant and urgent demands of his grandfather, Vince goes out to bring some wine. Out of his despair and bewilderment, he spends the whole night driving in across Illinois and he comes back with a totally different identity.

When Vince returns from his night long drive across Illinois, he is associated with a totally different identity. He takes off his identity that he has established basically upon the "ideal of masculine success". In reality, Vince resembles Wesley in *Curse of the Starving Class*, who according to Shepard's identity transformation technique, is doomed to repeat the life's pattern of his father. He takes on his father's cloths and reveals that he feels the

transforming process of his character. Similarly, Vince is going to repeat the life of his grandfather. He tells his girlfriend: "I've gotta carry on the line," (Buried Child 117). The night before he saw the reflection not only of his father's face on the windshield while he was driving all night long, but he perceived that face changing into his grandfather and of all his ancestors, "Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized." (Buried Child 117). It symbolically suggests that postmodern Americans' identities are partially determined and connected to their fathers and forefathers that they can't escape.

Vince's new identity is established upon the "American frontier". Vince plunges through the screen door, "tearing it off its hinges" as a drunken man and in a manner that echoes the Western violent cowboy. He hurls beer bottles at the house. He has connected to his dysfunctional family history. He is drunk and he has associated himself with cultural iconic images from the "Old West". As Clum puts it: "[Vince] connect[s] with ideals of masculinity for which there are no real models and with myths of the American land that are no longer relevant. One important expression of those ideals was the classic American Western with which Sam Shepard grew up and on which, to some extent, he built his persona." (173).

Vince is now recognized by his grandfather after having changed his identity. He is like many others of Shepard's characters who struggle to prove their manhood but they are entrapped by images of masculine traits passed on from generation to generation. When he associates himself with the images of violence and of alcohol, he is recognized by his family as a relative male. He then states that he is going to stay at the farmhouse with his family. Dodge declares that Vince is the owner of his property by handing him the ownership of the house and the land. Dodge is dead and Vince sits on his sofa. He is now doomed to repeat the fruitless search, disillusionment, self-destruction of the "American frontier" as his father's and grandfather's. However, Vince takes his grandfather's place and posture in the house, similarly, as Wesley when he transforms his identity into his father's identity by wearing his father's clothes. Vince becomes Dodge and Wesley becomes Weston. They can't escape the dilemma of their American identity.

Unlike Tilden and Vince, Dodge represents the eventual self-destruction of the paradox of American identity. He accepts the loss of his individual and national identity. He spends all his time sitting on a sofa, watching TV and drinking alcohol. He refuses to identify himself

with the traditional ideal of American identity: "the past is passed" (Buried Child 89), or identify himself with the present "I'm invisible".

As a rural farmer, Dodge was affected by the 1970s rural economic slowdown and his family was affected by the breakdown of traditional family structures and values. The new style of living "the masculine success" which took much space of appearance in American society after the Second World War. The economical and industrial boom affected the lives of the pioneering farming spirit. For Dodge, postmodernism has resulted in loss of identities, blurred moralities, loss of values, loss of nuclear families and loss of healthy familial relationships. America has become stupid country: "It's stupid! L.A. is stupid! So is Florida! All those Sunshine States. They're all stupid"(Buried Child 33).

Dodge used in the past to be a self-sufficient and self-dependent farming father. There is still pictures documenting the past of the family: "There is a picture of a farm. A big farm. A bull. Wheat. Corn. (Buried Child 89). According to Dodge: "[His] farm was producing enough milk to fill Lake Michigan twice over" (Buried Child 108). He could achieve his individual identity as a responsible father for his family and he could achieve his national identity as a farmer. He adopted and lived out his roles according to the "American frontier". His family was a "well-established family once ... Everything was settled with [them]"(Buried Child 108). However, the new era of postmodernism eradicated the codes of American traditional life and their set of moral and spiritual values by introducing "the ideal of masculine success". Dodge as many rural American farmers becomes unable to adopt the new values and identify himself with the new code of life in America, meanwhile; he is not able to maintain his traditional self images and codes of life basing on the "American frontier". Tilden's incestuous act with his mother is a symbol of the postmodern destruction on the farming community. Dodge's farm has not produced anything since the advent of postmodernism era, he says: "There has not been corn out there since about nineteen thirty five! That's the last time I planted corn out there"(Buried Child 20). Consequently, it became impossible for Dodge to maintain his national identity as a farmer and individual identity as a father. He now lives out the destruction of the modern American man.

In *Buried Child*, it is only Shelly who has a fixed identity, but she is partially affected by the family and its environment. She says: "I don't even know what I'm doing here." Shelly at the beginning is astonished at the unjustifiably weird behavior of the family:" What's

happened to this family anyway"(Buried Child 90). She comments on her imagination of the family and the reality she encounters:

I was curious. He made all of you sound familiar to me. Everyone of you. For every name. I had an image. Every time he'd tell me a name. I'd see the person. In fact, each of you was so clear in my mind that I actually believed it was you. I really believed that when I walked through that door that the who lived here would turn out to be the same people in my imagination. Real people. People with faces. But I don't recognize any of you. Not one. Not even the slightest resemblance."(Buried Child 106)

She tries to convince Vince to leave the family but Vince states that how he can leave his family in such miserable state. She then accepts the bewildering rejection of Vince by his relatives.

There is an emptiness of the characters' life and hollowness and bankruptcy of their contemporary American culture. All the characters can't perform their private or public roles. Halie is supposed to be a wife for her husband and a mother for her sons. She is supposed to perform as a care taker of Dodge's family. On the contrary, She is practically neither a wife-figure, nor is she a mother-figure of Dodge's family. She has usurped all her husband patriarchal power. She has become a mistress for her son. In fact, the incestuous act of Tilden and his mother changes the life of the family drastically. A sense of considerable shame destroys the family. All the family members are crippled by their sense of shame. Their roles are totally stopped and distorted. The family loses its trustfulness, unity, coherence, awareness of themselves, of their lives and of their future and past to the extent that as if there is no life inside the house, Shelly provides a vivid picture by commenting on her feeling about the family: "The feeling that nobody lives here but me. I mean everybody's gone. You're here, but it doesn't seem like you're supposed to be. ... Doesn't seem like he is supposed to be here either. I don't know what it is. It is the house or something" (Buried Child 87). The family is lost into an atmosphere of alienation, loneliness, estrangement and disintegration.

Dodge hints to Shelly the cause of his family destruction: "See, we were a well-established family once...Everything was settled with us...Then Halie got pregnant again. Out the middle of nowhere, she got pregnant. We weren't planning on havin' any more boys...In fact, we hadn't been sleeping in the same bed for about six years". (Buried Child 108,109). Furthermore, He ambiguously points out to Tilden as a father of the child: "It (the baby)

wanted to pretend that I was its father. She (Halie) wanted me to believe it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us."(Buried Child 109). The destructive secret of the family is revealed to Shelly. The illegal child was murdered by Dodge. It was a consequence of a sexual incestuous relationship between Halie and Tilden. She is now portrayed as a mistress of father Dewis and emotionally distant from her husband. She leaves her house at the opening act of the play and she comes back at the end of the play. She is not associated with any fixed role of a traditional mother. She transforms from a mother to a wife. Then she transforms herself from a mother and wife to a mistress. She only shares the roof with her husband and children.

The continuous self and role transformation of many of the characters indicates the desperate lack for a real sense of their identity. Exactly as Bottom states: "Many of them manipulate an ever-shifting series of roles and masks, thereby, suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of the self."(Bottom 15).Dodge's family is lost in their search for their true identities. They can't locate their true identities but they continue their search aimlessly. Exactly, as Dodge eventually puts it: "There's nothing to figure out. You just forge ahead."

Conclusion

Buried Child is an implicit contradiction and criticism against American myths of establishing American identity and a nuclear family. Tilden, Vince, Halie are not performing their private and public roles. Tilden and Vince are dramatically ruined by their identity crisis while Dodge represents the ultimate self-destruction of Americans' identity crisis. They are crippled in a way or another with both ideals. They are inevitably thwarted by every attempt to establish and identify their individual and national identities; yet, they can't abandon their search or escape their ultimate ruin. The self-destruction, the characters show, proves the invalidity of the rules, standards and values that American individual might adopt to achieve his/her individual and national identity. Both Dodge's and Tilden's familial destruction and disintegration are attributed to their lack for reality in American life and their lack for a sense of their true individual and national selves and roles with both models.

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