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Deterioration And Disintegration of American Family :Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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Abstract :
This study explores the mysteries and secrets of the American family, delving into the causes of suffering and disturbance within this social unit. It evaluates the quality and standards of American family life through an analysis of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*. Shepard, who himself came from a single-parent family, reflects his autobiographical experiences in his family-centered plays. The research employs a combination of plot and character analysis, thematic exploration, dialogue study, and stagecraft examination. Through textual analysis, the main themes of the play are uncovered. The study focuses on family disturbances within the American context, revealing that contemporary American families are undergoing significant sociological erosion. The findings indicate that the deterioration of the American family stems from a loss of moral values. Acts of incest and infanticide are shown to profoundly affect family dynamics, perpetuating a legacy of emotional barrenness from generation to generation. Family members experience loneliness, frustration, and a lack of belonging. The absence of love, affection, trust, and sacrifice leads to destructive emotions such as enmity, violence, and distrust, ultimately resulting in the disintegration of the family structure.

Keywords: *Family, incest, infanticide, erosion, emotional barrenness, distrust, enmity, anxiety*

Introduction

The term "family" originates from the Latin word *familia*, which initially referred to a household that included not only relatives but also servants and slaves. Over time, its meaning evolved to signify a group of people bound by kinship and shared obligations. Among all human social structures, the family holds a uniquely significant position as the most fundamental primary group. It serves as the cornerstone of society, playing a critical role in shaping individuals' development, values, and social interactions. This intricate social unit is typically composed of men, women, and their children, forming a microcosm of broader social organization. At its core, the family represents a union based on biological ties, although social constructs such as marriage and adoption contribute significantly to its dynamics and definition. The American Bureau of Census defines a family as a group of two or more individuals who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption and reside together. This definition underscores the dual importance of biological and social bonds in the conceptualization of family. Moreover, it affirms that members who enter a family through adoption are integral to its structure, enjoying equal rights and responsibilities as those related by blood. The universality of the family as an institution across human societies further emphasizes its foundational importance. Regardless of cultural, geographical, or temporal context, families serve as essential building blocks of social organization.

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Historical Perspectives on Family

In ancient societies, the concept of family existed in forms that were markedly different from modern integrated family systems. In ancient India, for example, family structures predated the formalization of marriage. During this period, there was no obligation for a husband and wife to live together with their children as a single unit. Instead, one-parent families were common, and familial bonds were less structured. Historical texts, such as the anecdote of Swetaketu, provide insights into this era. According to legend, Swetaketu's mother left her family to be with another individual. When Swetaketu appealed to his father, Uddalak, to intervene, the latter expressed his inability to do so due to the absence of societal or legal frameworks governing marital fidelity. This incident reportedly motivated Swetaketu to introduce the marriage system in ancient India, emphasizing the responsibility of parents toward their children and establishing the foundation for integrated family systems. This transition marked a significant evolution in the concept of family, which began to be characterized by love, affection, duty, and the sacrificial roles of parents. These values laid the groundwork for a cohesive familial structure, which has since been regarded as the bedrock of social stability and individual well-being.

Sociological and Psychological Dimensions of Family

From a sociological perspective, the family is examined as a complex social phenomenon that influences and is influenced by the broader society. Sociologists view the family as a predictable and tangible structure, shaped by cultural norms, economic conditions, and social policies. They analyze it in terms of its external functions, such as socialization, economic support, and reproduction of societal norms. As a dynamic institution, the family adapts to changing social and economic circumstances, reflecting broader societal trends.

Psychologists, on the other hand, delve into the emotional and psychological dimensions of family life. They explore the sentiments, attachments, and sacrifices that define familial relationships, focusing on how these aspects contribute to individual mental health and interpersonal dynamics. The family serves as a primary source of emotional support, shaping an individual’s identity, self-esteem, and capacity for forming relationships. Artists and writers, too, have historically been captivated by the family, portraying its intricate emotional fabric and its role as a microcosm of human experience.

The Universal Relevance of Family

The family remains a universal institution, transcending cultural, geographical, and temporal boundaries. Anthropological studies have consistently demonstrated that families, in some form, exist in all human societies. This universality underscores the essential role of the family in human survival and development. It acts as the first unit of socialization, where individuals learn societal norms, values, and roles. Despite variations in structure—ranging from nuclear and extended families to blended and single-parent families—the core functions of the family remain consistent.

Modern families, however, are not isolated entities. They are deeply embedded in and influenced by the societies in which they exist. Social, economic, and political changes directly impact family structures and dynamics. For instance, globalization and urbanization have led to shifts from traditional extended family systems to nuclear family arrangements in many parts of the world. Similarly, advancements in technology and changing gender roles have redefined familial responsibilities and interaction.

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Research Gap : This paper is entitled deterioration and disintegration of American family: Sam Shepard's buried child. The present paper examines the status of American families based on *Buried Child,* a family play by Sam Shepard. Buried child is one of Sam Shepard's family trilogy of Sam Shepard. The family plays of Shepard have not attracted the researchers of English in the field of drama. So much study has not been done on American families.

Research objectives

To examine Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* with a particular focus on the themes of lewd relationships and infanticide within a family.

To explore the theme of emotional barrenness and its perpetuation across generations in the American family.

To analyze the elements of loneliness, enmity, and distrust that contribute to the disintegration of the American family.

Methodology:

Sam Shepard, acclaimed as a master American dramatist, made his mark in the 1960s with groundbreaking experiments in theater that redefined the boundaries of modern drama. As a high modernist, he shifted his focus to family-centered plays by the mid-1970s, a time when the American family structure faced significant upheaval and an erosion of traditional values. Shepard's work reflects his personal experiences, rooted in a fractured family dynamic that profoundly influenced his artistic vision. Raised in a single-parent household, Shepard experienced the absence of his father, an airman who frequently neglected his familial responsibilities. Left under the care of his mother, Shepard endured a strained relationship marked by emotional turmoil. This difficult upbringing reached a tragic climax when his mother, reportedly under the influence of alcohol, died in a road accident. These autobiographical elements resonate strongly in Shepard's plays, often referred to as "family plays," which authentically portray the complexities of familial dysfunction and emotional estrangement.

Myth:

Buried Child tells a family story of incest and infanticide. Dodge is the husband of Halie. They belong to a well established family. They have a big dairy farm. It produces enough milk. Everything is well settled. In the meantime Halie gets pregnant. Suspicion arises in the mind of Dodge. They have not slept in the same bed for six years. Halie gives birth to a male baby. The child wants to grow in the family. Dodge gets upset. He picks up the child. He kills the child. He drowns it. He buries it. The play is entitled *Buried Child.Tilden ,* the elder son of Dodge and Halie reveals the crime to Shelly*: "I had a son once but* buried him."

Plot and Character Analysis:

The play opens with Dodge , head of the family who is lying on the couch asleep and drunk. He is a chronic cough-er and gets relieved only with television and whiskey. Halie , Dodge's wife is a habitual flirt , who has an extramarital affair with father Dewis , local clergy man. Tilden the elder son is mentally ill and middle-aged who has recently returned from jail. Bradley , the other son of Dodge and Halie is savage and crippled with one leg but dominant and ferocious who does not live with them but visits occasionally. As the play proceeds Vince , Tilden's son , comes home after six years with his girlfriend Shelley to meet his father.

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Vince enters home and decides to stop over at his grandparent's home on the way there but is surprised to know when Dodge fails to recognize him. Shelley thinks that they have entered the wrong house and tries to convince Vince to leave but he does not move. Tilden then enters the room but does not recognize Vince. Dodge asks Vince to buy him alcohol. Vince gets out to do so. Meanwhile Shelley talks to Tilden about Vince but she feels that Tilden is unable to identify Vince. Tilden talks about his son with Shelley and reveals that the baby was killed by Dodge and he buried the child in the backyard. Then Bradly reenters and starts harassing Shelley. Thereafter Halie enters with father Dewis with whom she has an extramarital affair. Halie makes a hot argument with Dodge and Bradly until Shelley intervenes. In anger and despair Shelley grabs Bradly's wooden leg and expresses her fury over the family. Father Dewis tries to cool down her temper. Vince returns drunk and says that he has to stay at the farm house with his family. Dodge and Halie recognize Vince and Dodge accepts him as owner of the house. Shelley leaves Vince. Vince throws the wooden leg outside the house and Bradly goes crawling for it. Father Dewis leaves their house. The play ends with Dodge's death and Vince covers a blanket and rises over him. Helie starts yelling that corn has bloomed in the back yard. In the final scene Tilden is seen walking around the room with the corpse of the baby in his hands.

Discussion :

Buried Child is a family play of Sam Shepard. It deals with family disturbance in American families. What happens in a family in the play is microcosm of American family the play exposes the lewd relationship between mother Helie and son Tilden and it results in infanticide and stagnation of the family. It indicates the degradation of moral values in the American family. The disintegration of the family is hastened by free sex relations.

Helie has an extramarital relationship with father Dewis. Helie and her elder son Tilden have an incestuous relationship as a result Helie gives birth to a male baby. The child is killed and buried in the backyard of their farm house by Dodge. This act of incest and infanticide ruins the family.

The play *Buried Child* exhibits the theme of a legacy of emotional barrenness that passes over from generation to generation. In act two Vince visits the family with his girlfriend Shelley they feel that Dodge ,Tilden and Bradly don't recognize Vince it indicates that there is lack of love, affection and belonging in the family.

In act one Dodge is afraid of his son Bradly. Bradly cuts his hair when Dodge is asleep.It indicates the distrust and enmity in the family.In act three Vince leaves the house to buy a whiskey for his grandfather Dodge but he comes back drunk and enters the house violently crashing the front door and hurling the empty whiskey bottles it hints how distrust , enmity and violence prevails on the family. The family is the source of peace and happiness where there is love and affection among family members. But in Dodge's family they don't trust each other. There is no family bond. Dodge expresses his anxiety to Vince. *Dodge:*

"I don't wanna lay-down for a while ! Every time I lay down something happens ! Look what happens !They will steal your bottle! They will cut your hair ! They will murder your children ! That's what'll happen. (P. 93)

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The play exposes loneliness in American families. Dodge is drunk with alcohol , helpless and expresses his loneliness to Vince:

Dodge - You forgot to get me a bottle ! That is what you forgot. Anybody in this house get me a bottle, Anybody ! but nobody will. I hope you all remember this when you get up in years. When you find yourselves immobilized. Dependent on the whims of others. (P.96)

Conclusions:

A family serves as the foundational unit of society, acting as a nursery and training ground for children, where they learn love, affection, duty, and sacrifice. These values enable families to thrive and perpetuate harmonious relationships across generations. However, the absence of moral values, emotional connection, and a sense of belonging leads to familial disintegration. Distrust, enmity, and emotional barrenness among family members contribute to the erosion of familial bonds and the eventual collapse of the family unit. The analysis of *Buried Child* reveals the extent of sociological erosion within the American family, highlighting themes of dysfunction, generational trauma, and the disintegration of moral values. The play underscores the collapse of the American Dream, portraying families as fragmented and burdened by loneliness, frustration, and unresolved tensions. Sam Shepard's depiction of these issues offers a stark reflection of societal changes and their impact on the family.

Future Perspectives

Further research is essential to deepen the understanding of the themes explored in Sam Shepard's family plays. A broader study of Shepard's works can shed light on the evolving dynamics of the American family and provide a comprehensive picture of its sociological and emotional state. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that integrate psychology, sociology, and literary analysis could offer valuable insights into the suffering, disturbances, and challenges faced by families in contemporary society. Such studies could also explore potential pathways to restoring harmony and moral values within the family structure.

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