

Quest for Identity: A Study of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child*

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Abstract

The research aims at studying the quest for identity which spans over the life of an American family in Sam Shepard's Play Buried Child. This paper extensively explores and portrays how members of Dodge's family are struggling with the identity. It also focuses on lack of belongingness, search for roots, and association with past. Almost all the characters in this play are struggling with their identities. They have different identities at different times and are desperately trying to restore and establish their identities. In an attempt to claim their lost identity they resort to violence. It also analyses how various reasons or causes such as: Incest, Infanticide, traumatic

effects, Alcoholism and escaping from reality contribute to the identity crisis.

Key Words: *Identity; Crisis; Alienation; Estrangement; Violence; Isolation; Loss.*

Introduction

Sam Shepard was a post-modern American playwright, who has been described by New York magazine, "The greatest American playwright of his generation."(qtd. in *Fifteen One-Act Plays*)
i) He dealt with the theme of identity as a main subject in most of his works. In *Buried Child* he presents the picture of misfits and outcasts of a family involved in the horrible act of incest committed by the mother Halie and her oldest son Tilden. They were unsuccessfully trying to cope with the events overshadowing them:

Incest and infanticide. Despite dealing these events through communication they remain silent because of shame and this shame affects the family's homeostasis and normalcy.

In *Buried Child* the theme of identity is extensively portrayed. Every character of the play faces identity crisis, lack of belongingness, search for roots, association with past and witnesses distorted relationship between father and sons, at individual level as well as in the family. All characters except Vince's girlfriend Shelly suffered from identity crisis which has caused internal and external conflicts among them. In view of this Annette J. Saddik comments, "Deal with the fragile boundaries of identity and the impossibility of locating an authentic self-outside of the roles, masks, images and performances that mark human action." (*Contemporary American Drama* 131).

The quest for identity is encompassed by the grandson of Dodge, Vince. He has gone through an identity crisis at home. Vince has left his home six years ago and has created a new identity for himself in New York. Before returning to home, he has premonition that he may not be recognized by his family. He says to Shelly that, "I just don't want to have them think that I've suddenly arrived out of the middle of nowhere completely deranged." (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 85). As he enters the house, he is not recognized by anyone, even refused by Dodge and Tilden to have any flesh and blood relation. In Act Two, he is desperately endeavouring to create his identity but gets humiliated as Dodge rejects to recognise him:

VINCE: Grandpa, where did Halie go? Maybe we should call her.

DODGE: What are you talking about? Do you know what you're talking about? Are

you just talking for the sake of talking?

Lubricating the gums?

VINCE: I'm trying to figure out

what's going on here!

DODGE: Is that it?

VINCE: Yes. I mean I expected
everything to be different.

DODGE: Who are you to expect anything?

Who are you supposed to be?

VINCE: I'm Vince! Your Grandson!

DODGE: Vince. My Grandson.

VINCE: Tilden's son.

DODGE: Tilden's son, Vince.

VINCE: You haven't seen me for a long
time.

DODGE: When was the last time?

VINCE: I don't remember.

DODGE: You don't remember?

VINCE: No.

DODGE: You don't remember. How am I
supposed to remember if you
don't remember? (*Sam Shepard Seven
Plays* 89)

At home, instead of gaining an
identity, he lost his identity that he has
gained for himself in the New York. Vince
was firmly bent on to regain his lost
identity. To meet his quest for identity he
needs to prove his origins but was denied
of having any bond of flesh and blood
between his father, Tilden and grandfather,
Dodge. After complete denial of any
relationships, he became baffled and in
frustration he cries, "How could they not
recognize me! How in the hell could they
not recognise me! I'm their son". (*Sam
Shepard Seven Plays* 97) Shelly became
perplexed by the etiquettes and ambience
of the Dodge family and sporadically
began to acknowledge the rejection of
Vince. She asks questions to Tilden about
Vince to know his identity, she says:

SHELLY: (to TILDEN) Are you Vince's
father?

TILDEN: (to SHELLY) Vince?

SHELLY: (pointing to VINCE) This is
supposed to be your son! Is he your

son? Do you recognize him! I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other! (TILDEN stares at VINCE. DODGE wraps himself up in the blanket and sits on sofa staring at the floor.) (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 92)

Tilden completely fails to recognise Vince and left his identity an unsolved mystery. Shelly loses hope and tells the Vince to leave but Vince implores her for more time to know his family. In despair he started blaming and questioning himself of having committed any unpardonable offence. He considers himself a misfit of the family. He opines his view as, "I have been known to plunge into sinful infatuation with the Alto Saxophone. Sucking on number 5 reeds deep into the wee, wee hours" (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 97). In order to establish his identity he started repeating his childhood tricks in a hope that it will help in regaining their memories. Shelly made a

sarcastic comment on the family members regarding identity when Dodge beseeches them to get a bottle of whiskey for him. Shelly asks Vince, "Why don't you get him a bottle. Vince? May be it would help everybody to identify each other" (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 94). At the end of the play, Vince was successful in establishing his identity only when he resorted to violence. He returned home drunk after an overnight sojourn, suddenly becomes violent and starts screaming and smashing empty whiskey bottles at the wall:

(VINCE pushes his face against the screen from the porch and stares in at everyone.)

DODGE: Where's my goddamn bottle!

VINCE: (looking in at DODGE.) What? Who is that?

DODGE: It's me! Your Grandfather! Don't play stupid with me! Where's my two bucks!

VINCE: Your two bucks?

(HALIE moves away from DEWIS, upstage, peers out at VINCE, trying to recognize him.)

HALIE: Vincent? Is that you, Vincent?

(*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 125 -26)

Almost all the characters in this play are struggling with their identities. They have different identities at different times. Dodge seems to have stable identity but changed his identity from a responsible man to a sofa ridden drinker. His identity of being father is challenged by his son Bradley as he reminds him that he is still his father. He lacks his position and identity as a father. Halie, wife of Dodge also indicates that he used to be different. Halie's identity is bit confused, she is wife of Dodge but both are estranged. She turned to be religious but at the same time, she has an affair with the father Dewis. She is mother of Tilden and also bore his child. Tilden's identity is also struggling as he says that he used to have feelings of

being self but that has been destroyed.

When Vince came home he calls Tilden:

VINCE: (reentering to TILDEN.) you want a nything, Dad?

TILDEN: (looks up at VINCE.) Me?

VINCE: Yeah, you. Dad. That's you. (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 98)

It shows that Tilden is struggling with his identity as a father. Shelly, the only character who is sensible and has an intact identity but is also affected by the family demeanour and loses her sense of identity as she no longer recognizes herself and says, "I don't even know what I'm doing here" (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 121). Incestuous child's identity is more confused than anyone. He was son of Halie and Tilden, Halie is also mother of Tilden; so the child was born as a son as well as grandson to Halie and brother to Tilden. At the same time he was Dodge's grandson and stepson.

To conclude, the play is about the struggle between creativity and

destruction. Shepard is working with the themes of home, family, heredity, and environment; as he moves into the exploration of the self in relationship to others. As Esther Harriot states, "Buried Child continues Shepard's obsession with identity" (American Voices: Five Contemporary Playwrights in Essays and Interviews 12). In the last episode Vince narrates:

I studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield, I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time. And every breath marked him. Marked him forever without him knowing. And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same

eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And I went on like that changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. The eyes. The breath. The mouth. I followed my family clear into Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. (*Sam Shepard Seven Plays* 130)

In the above anecdote we see the identities of different generations getting merger simultaneously. Vince who tries to escapes from his lineage but find whirled as a new entrant in the same heredity. Not only Vince almost all members of family struggled with the identity crisis individually as well as in family.



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