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REFLECTING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAMILY IN POSTMODERN AMERICA:
A STUDY OF SAM SHEPARD'S *AGES OF THE MOON*

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ABSTRACT

Sam Shepard is the most prolific contemporary American playwright who has portrayed the true picture of American family in his plays. He has written about fifty plays and in all his plays American family is the central subject. The play *Ages of the Moon* is one act play. The play is not a direct representation of American family but it depicts postmodern family in America through the prism of how the lack of a traditional family tells upon the psyche of the people through the characters of Ames and Byron. The tragic events that are being unfolded in the play by making lives of both the characters monotonous and tragic have root causes in family matters. Both characters in the play don't have any traditional family links which makes their lives absurd and meaningless. Both characters mourn over their past which has taken away all their happiness and make their lives monotonous and tragic. Both characters have broken family relationships which occupy their minds throughout the play. Thus, the article tries to explore the significance of family in postmodern America and depicts how the lack of family institution and family love affects an individual's life in postmodern America.

Key words: American family, Traditional, Monotonous, Absurd, Alienation, Significance, Postmodern.

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The play *Ages of the Moon* (2009) is a one act play by Sam Shepard. There are only two characters in the play – Ames and Byron who are friends to each other. When the play opens, we come to know that Ames has been banished from his home by his wife for his infidelity. Ames then calls his age old friend Byron for moral support and to give him company in his separation. Byron comes to give him company in this situation. Throughout the play these two characters talk about their past experiences, express their frustrations in their lives, talk about women, eclipse of the moon and many other things. They also fight with each other, abuse each other and then get re-united. The play ends abruptly. In the end of the play, the characters just stare at the moon from the same place where they meet at the beginning of the play. There is no development in the action of the play.

Sam Shepard has written some fifty plays, all of them deal with the American family directly or indirectly. As Roudane puts it, "American family is the central subject of all his plays"(4). But the plays like *Buried Child*, *True West*, *A Lie of the Mind*, *The Late Henry Moss*, are called family plays and these plays have been exclusively dedicated to American family life in postmodern era. Shepard being one of the prolific postmodern playwrights makes a critique of the postmodern American family through his plays. Although the play *Ages of the Moon* doesn't include in the circle of family plays, it shows the way of American family life indirectly.

The text is not a direct representation of American family as there are no traditional links of a family. The play depicts postmodern family in America through the prism of how the lack of a traditional family tells upon the psyche of the people. Though most of the scholars have not considered it as a family play, the tragic events that are being unfolded in the play by making lives of both the characters monotonous and tragic have root causes in family matters. Ames and Byron experience a void in their lives because of the rejection or the death of their wives. Apart from some references to their wives who are not actively present in the play, there are no other characters who come lively on the stage. So both the characters are thrown into isolation to search the meaning of their lives. Ames and Byron are friends who meet after decades of separation and come to know that both have suffered loss and have been unable to bridge that gap in their lives. Both have become very fragile now and get easily offended by a slightest remark that is not intended to offend. Both are in a way victim of postmodern autonomy to individuals in which sticking to family and its values is considered as obstacles in the way of the progress of an individual. Postmodern liberal individualistic framework believes in maximizing the autonomy of an individual which comes at the expense of breaking social fabric based on love to an alternative model of living based on mercenary interests. The representation of this isolation is best found in the lives of Ames and Byron. Redfield writes about alternative social lives and the influence of family either in the form of affecting behavior of an individual or not being able to transform any change in society due to excessive individual choices granted by individual freedom essential to American family:

...the modern world is characterized not only by the breakup of families but also by the weakening of community life. The present-day world is full of a multitude of socially sanctioned alternatives, and even non-socially sanctioned behavior is far less severely penalized than formerly. Conformity based on intimate impressions made in early youth and related to ultimate traditional values of life has come more and more to be replaced by the need for holding one's own in a world of comparative strangers and for conforming to values derived largely from the newspaper, radio, advertisements, and moving pictures. Values derived from these commercialized sources are secular rather than sacred, superficial rather than deeply rooted, unstable rather than long-lived. In this world the individual is, in a sense, free to make choices. But if he has not acquired a sound basis for judgment, he may become a prey to any influence which happens to come along. Much of the freedom of American life appears, in fact, to be of this sterile and empty sort, the understandings derived from casual association being too slight and impermanent to provide a basis for common action (177).

Absurdity and Sense of Alienation

Ames and Byron are absurd characters whose life becomes absurd and meaningless because they don't have any traditional family links. They don't have any aim and feel hopeless as a result of broken family relationships. Although they are in the late sixties their life is not stable and they behave like children. They often fight each other, abuse each other and get reunited out of frustration. They talk about women, sex and other vulgar things and at the same time having alcohol throughout the play. This shows their sense of alienation and broken relation with the past:

People who have a profound hunger for anything – the hunger for drugs, the hunger for sex – this hunger is a direct response to a profound sense of emptiness and aloneness, maybe, or disconnectiveness. (qtd. in Bigsby 11)

Both characters in the play lament their past, which has made their lives tragic and monotonous, while sharing their past experiences with each other. Ames feels hopeless and gives way to a sense of

alienation after he is banished by his wife. He feels alienated from his home and family and he doesn't like to live a life of alienation and separation:

Ames: Maybe I've been out here on my own too much.

Byron: That's quite possible.

Ames: Out of touch.

Byron: Could be.

Ames: It's not good.

Byron: What.

Ames: Being so...remote, like this. (9)

Although Byron gives him company after Ames' banishment, Byron himself feels homeless and experiences a sense of alienation after the death of Lacey as he tells the story of Lacey to his friend Ames:

Byron: (*Still on knees*) Funny, isn't it? I never could've imagined I'd be out here like this. Some strange state. How'd you wind up out here anyway? Middle of some night – some moon – where the hell are we supposed to be? The East? The South? East of the Mississippi? Woods. Creeks. Frogs.

Where is this? Doesn't feel like home to me.

Ames: No.

Byron: Doesn't feel anything like home to me.

Ames: No.

Byron: 'Course, nothing does anymore since Lacey died. (39)

After the death of Lacey he feels alienated, isolated and homelessness from the outside world. As a result, his life becomes absurd and meaningless.

Death of Lacey suddenly becomes the central focus of both the characters. Lacey is one of those characters who tell us the significance of social relations especially the familial ones. Lacey is introduced in the middle of the play by Byron as his girlfriend/wife who is already dead. Death of Lacey is one of those incidents which carry within itself the significance of family. For the most part, the tragedy of both the characters arises from their lack of belonging. Neither Byron nor Ames has a family or its members to associate themselves with. The lack of belonging and the frustration thereof is explicit in the very act of Byron carrying his dead wife on his back for months without anybody noticing in the streets and the reasons he gives for people not noticing her being dead is that he had kept her on his back which felt like he was giving her a piggyback ride. The enactment of this frustration by Byron itself explains his isolation and the shock he receives from the death of his wife. In a traditional family, loss of one family member is loss for everyone and everyone shares the same sorrow. But in the mechanical world in which Byron lives, has nobody to share his loss except with the dead. The social alienation of Byron and Ames can well be realized from the fact that there is no reference whatsoever to their other family members in the entire play. It is only after Ames calls him for the moral and emotional support that he reveals about the death of his wife:

I bundled her all up. There was some snow left... I bundled her all up in sweaters and her blue terry cloth robe. Knit cap pulled down over her ears. I closed her eyelids and wrapped her arms around me so it looked like she was just riding on my back. Hugging me. Piggy back. Like this...I stuffed her icy hands in my pockets and held them there and we walked all over town like that (44).

Fragmentation

The characters in his plays are fragmented and their connection with the past has been lost. They find themselves in a complex and centerless world. They feel alienated and isolated from the outside world and are not part of any social world. As Bigsby puts it:

His characters live discontinuous lives. Some connection has been broken between themselves and the past (mythic and historical), between themselves and their families, their lovers, even the language they speak. Experience comes in fragments.His is a world of distant echoes, of narratives that have lost their point, individuals who have simplified their lives out of anxiety or passion. These

are so many Gatsbys viewing life through a single window, blinded by the brightness of an obsession, reinventing themselves so that the very idea of identity becomes suspect. (27-28)

In *Ages of the Moon*, both characters have lost their touch with the past, their lovers and the society as well. They are fragmented and broken characters. They are not able to remember their past experiences properly which comes only in fragmentation:

Byron: Minor?

Ames: Well, you know –

Byron: No, I don't know. They're all major, as far as I'm concerned. At this point.

Ames: Not something lasting – memorable.

Byron: Aha! Quickly forgotten.

Ames: Exactly (7).

Byron also fails to remember the past. Although Byron is able to remember some events of the past but at the same time, he fails to remember Ames to be there with him:

Byron: Went to the Derby one time and they were selling thousand dollar shots of this stuff in gold-plated mint julep cups. Flowery engraving all around the rim. Remnants of the aristocracy.

Ames: I remember that.

Byron: I don't remember you there. (16)

While narrating the story about Roger Miller to Byron, Ames often forgets the story and it is Byron who remembers him where he was in the story. He tells it in fragments and it seems that it is not easy for Ames to recount the past experiences for he has lost the connection with the past:

Ames: Now, where was I?

Byron: We were all drunk and stoned.

Ames: You weren't! I was.

Byron: Okay. Okay (21).

The loss of memory is the result of their broken relationship with their past and their loved ones which always occupy their minds and which make their lives aimless, hopeless and tragic. Shepard actually paints the picture of postmodern America where a man's life has become absurd for he has lost his touch with his past and family.

Conclusion

The study attempts to explore the significance of family institution for an individual in the postmodern American society. Shepard reflects how the lack of family institution and family love affect an individual's life and make his life chaotic, absurd and meaningless. In the play, both characters are broken and give way to a feeling of alienation after losing their touch with their family and the past. They have broken family relationships which occupy their minds throughout the play. As a result their life becomes tragic, aimless and they fall victim to social alienation. This all shows the need and importance of family for an individual in postmodern America and also shows how family and human relationships play a crucial role in the life of an individual.

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