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TRAUMA AND POST-TRAUMAVIOLENCE IN SAM SHEPARD'S *THE LATE HENRY MOSS*

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ABSTRACT

The paper underlines the haunting memories of the World War II and its resultant trauma that plays a crucial role for the eruption of crises in many American families. The Late Henry Moss is about a dead father, who comes back as a ghost to revisit the past. The paper explores the insensible role of the father, who has been traumatized by the poignant effects of war memory and destruction, becomes responsible for the destruction of his own family. The paper attempts to analyse the dynamics of postmodern world, where people are alienated from each other and even from themselves due to the traumatizing memory of violence long after the happenings of violence witnessed or experienced.

1. Introduction

The violence of the event of World War II has deeply traumatised the participants and the spectators to the core. The two World Wars form an integral part of human history. World Wars had vast global effects and almost everyone got affected by them. As evident in *The Late Henry Moss*, Shepard talks about the Second World War which is a continuation of the first. Apart from dramatists like Sam Shepard, poets have also written about the devastating effects of War as Wilfred Owen's *Strange Meeting* is one example. The play depicts the devastating effects of domestic violence which is deeply rooted in war trauma. All the members of Moss family fall victim to psychological and emotional trauma. A traumatic experience is one that, "Shatters or disables the individual's cognitive and perceptual capacities so that the experience never becomes part of the ordinary memory system" (Leys 2000: 298). Henry Moss is traumatized by

experiencing the bloodshed and violence in the Second World War. He reveals much more than just the moment he fled the family. He reveals that he is haunted by the past and traumatized by his own violence. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as, a “shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (1996: 63). Moss family has not lost any life in battle but the psychological effect runs deep throughout their consciousness. Henry Moss exemplifies the father figures in Shepard’s body of work who have been afflicted by their participation in the Second World War. Henry, irritated by both the facts that Conchalla pronounced him dead in front of the whole jail community and thus everybody now thinks he is, and by Taxi’s obvious inability to understand him, bursts out in a soliloquy of fragmented and elliptical sentences rapidly thrown one after the other concomitantly revealing and concealing information about his past:

What did I ever do to deserve this [Conchalla *repeatedly emphasizing that he was dead*]? I’ve led an honourable life for the most part. I’ve served my country. I’ve dropped bombs on total strangers! I’ve worked my ass off for idiots. Paid my taxes. There’s never once been any question of my—existence! Never once. It’s humiliating! A man my age—to be forced into this kind of position. I’m too old to having [*sic!*] to prove I’m alive! (2000:79).

He seems to be highlighting his unworthy non-existent being, like thousands of others whose being is rendered unimportant by simply counting them as an entry in the war number game of dead and living. He is expressing, what W. H. Auden, who himself was a war survivor and veteran, documents through his poem, Unknown Citizen. The unknown citizen is simply counted as a number without mentioning his individualistic self. As the violence is relived through the reminiscence of past and the ‘facts’ of past keep on revealing themselves, the main idea of delving deep to look for truth about the death of Henry, seem to be losing the meaning. For it leads one to question itself and wonder “if sometimes, the truth is better left buried” (Stow, 2017).

2. Review of Literature

The play, *The Late Henry Moss*, is enacted many times for theatrical presentations. As a result, reviews of its dramatic and theatrical production are available in abundance. But serious accounts of research about the play are scarce. However, I will document first the more serious accounts of research conducted on the play and will add this review with theatre reviews as well. The play is the latest version of the Shepardian style series of six plays that repeatedly documents anger and angst that engulfs the American family life. Characters are presented not only angry and suspicious. Often they are violent too to create a sense of impending tragedy, where a son, or a father, or brother, or a mother is at the altar of violence. An eerie sense of foreboding and catastrophic crises with dreary dullness of suspicion fills the time unendingly.

Plays of Sam Shepard have been enormously analysed academically on the basis of contemporary recurring themes of family disintegration and violence. Roudane argues that Shepard’s plays share “[T]he familiar

material, of course, negotiates the problematic conditions of the American family and its wayward inhabitants” (2002: 279). *The Nightmare of the Nation*: *Sam Shepard and the Paradox of American Identity* by Madachy, explores the play that de-emphasizes the American society as a sanitized version of historical reality, one that prides in self-sufficiency and pioneering spirit to offer an exclusionary and violent reality of America (2003). “Retelling The Myth: Sam Shepard's *True West* and *The Late Henry Moss*”, by Harper, states that the play documents the complicated relationships within the American families (2006). “Dramatic Representation of a Culture of Violence in Sam Shepard’s *The Late Henry Moss*” by Rád, offers an intertextual reading of *The Late Henry Moss* focusing on the play’s ritual structure and the different interwoven levels and modes of narrative. The paper explores the play as a repetition of Shepardian style play. Allen J. Kuharski endorses Rad in his view of the play as the repetition of Shepard’s earlier play, that portray family members in unending unpleasant relationship with each other. To him the play captures “a certain American monstrosity” (2002). “The Late Henry Moss at Southwark Playhouse – Review” by Amy Stow, explores the play depicting a reunion of two estranged brothers, in “a peculiarly feral air” when they are haunted by an absent father and an unresolved past of domestic violence and familial betrayal (2015). Jonathan Lavalley reviews the play as something that is just another play where “men have feelings, and can only express them by yelling and punching” (2018).

The review leads one to many research questions. Biggest of all is what lead to domestic situation, which otherwise is a soothing space, to a cosmos of spousal abuse, sibling rivalry, neurotic yelling and punching coupled with a ruthless enquiry in line with suspicious feeling of betrayal. The earlier research has need supplied any logical reason to the scenario. This research aims to attempt an explanation and elaboration of a scene that has been turned into a desert that needs exorcism of a toxic grip of a dead father, who has been, all most debased due to the violent enterprise of war, which has not only psychological destabilised him, but also created the brooding sense of impending catastrophe of a normal domestic setting.

3. Post-war trauma and domestic violence

This traumatizing event of war displaces Henry and makes him unable to connect with his family and to the world around him. The War trauma has deep and profound psychological and emotional effects on him. He “is crippled emotionally” (Wiess 2005: 7). He turns violent and brutal to his family after returning from the War. “The play picks up the figure of war-traumatized father incapable of re-integrating into and fitting in the family, re-enacting the violence and brutality he saw and inflicting upon strangers within the home” (Wiess 2014:326).

The post-traumatic stress makes him behave violently with his wife and she locks him out of the home which leads to the devastating outburst of rage and violence on the part of Henry. As he recalls the past when he fled his family, “I remember the floor—was yellow—I can see the floor—and—her blood—her blood was smeared across it. I thought I'd killed her—but it was me. It was me I killed” (2000:70).

Earl is not ready to hear all this as he does not want to recall the past and tries to leave but Henry continues to describe his plight:
I ran out into the yard and I remember—I remember this—death. I remember it now—Cut off. Everything—far away. Birds. Trees. Sky. Removed! Everything—out beyond reach. And I ran. I ran to the car and I drove. I drove for days with the windows wide open. The wind beating across my eyes—my face. I had no map. No destination. I just—drove (2000: 70).

Hence, Henry has lost his self-identity due to the emotional trauma and domestic violence which is the result of the War trauma he has experienced. He has been cut off from his family and the other world. He could not make himself to connect with his family and the society as well. He has failed to become a good father as he failed to find his destination, which actually is symbolic of separation and detachment from your loved ones. So in the play, Shepard reveals that how violence affects American families and that violence is deeply rooted.

UNICEF has documented that it is an established observation that “growing up with violence in the home is a devastating experience for many children across the world” (2006: 3). A substantial number of studies have highlighted that children who observe “domestic violence are more likely to be affected by violence as adults – either as victims or perpetrators”. (UNICEF2006: 3). The play offers a spectacular example of this kind of situation. Ray and Earl also fall victim to the family trauma. The domestic violence in the family in the past becomes a trauma for the sons and has a deep psychological effect upon them. The tragic event of the past when Henry beat his wife is like a trauma for the whole family, especially for the children. When a father, who is considered to be a care giver, behaves with his wife violently in front of his children, it leaves a deep and profound effect on the children. The children always experience a kind of what is called post-traumatic stress when they recall their past. They often leave off their family. It's observed that sometimes teenagers chose to escape the situation that witness violence to make it less corrosive. Ray and Earl also leave their home in order to get rid of this domestic violence and often try to forget their past that's why they are informed about the death of their father.

The post-traumatic stress is as acute for the children as it is for the survivors of the battle. As in *The Late Henry Moss*, Earl Moss tells the audience, he remembers the past and family life “like a war.” Shepard supplies us the reason why the sons in the play try to deny their past and they don't want to accept the legacy of their father. But, for Shepard one cannot escape the past. The brothers ‘inherit’ the legacy and heredity of violence, alcoholism of their father.

The Moss family members exhibit various symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSS) including “hyper-arousal” described by Herman as a state of “permanent alert” whereby “the traumatized person startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly” (1997:35). Other times the victim may “re-enact” the moment of trauma “with a fantasy of changing the outcome of the dangerous encounter” (Herman 1997: 39). Psychanalysts refer to this type of re-enactment as “repetition compulsion” (Frued, 1987: 294; Grant and Crawley 2002: 38).

That is what we may see in the play *The Late Henry Moss*. The two brothers repeat and re-enact the same what they have witnessed in the past. The emotional and psychological effect of the trauma is obvious when they re-enact their father's violence against their mother. In Act one, Earl turns on his brother, "Earl suddenly whirls around and attacks Ray. He empowers him and sends him crashing across the refrigerator. Ray hits the floor. Earl crosses to him and kicks Ray in the stomach. Ray collapses" (2000:28). In Act Three of the play, it is Ray who re-enacts the violent role of Henry and behaves with Earl in the same manner as Henry did with his wife in order to recall him the real past. Ray "turns himself into drunken Henry" (2000:62) and is "savagely kicking Earl all over the stage. Earl scrambles on his hands and knees but Ray is relentless" (2000:63).

The victim of a traumatic experience- whether the experience is physical, psychological, or emotional- will often try to repress the memory of the trauma, sealing it off into the past, but this often proves impossible for the victim. In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), Judith Herman observes that psychological trauma involves "the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud". She elaborates this further:

People who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility and thereby serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy. (1997: 1)

The alienated mother and the haunted sons are internally conflicted as they alternately attempt to vocalize their traumatic memories and to bury them. The traumatized family members attempt to repress their memories of trauma, but these attempts at repression ultimately prove futile. This trauma has made them incapable to fit into the family and the society as well and the result is the loss of their self-identity. Earl, in the beginning of the play, tells Ray: "I was never one to live in the past" (2000:6). Ray also repeats the same at the end of the play in Act Three: "I was never one to live in the past" (2000:71). They try to deny their past as it is the painful moment in the history of their family and when they recall it they are haunted by it and are experiencing the fear. The changing roles of brothers reveal the culture of violence, denial and fear in the family.

4. Identity Crises

Shepard depicts repercussions of war trauma; it collapses the individuals and American family in which the members experience psychological, emotional and physical trauma, as many families have lost their loved ones in World War II. This trauma makes them unable to fit themselves into the family and society of America. As a result, they lose their self-identity and the individual is torn out physically, socially, emotionally and morally.

Therefore, the dream of the individuals and the democracy on which the ethos of American society was based has been shattered. This shattering of dream has been revealed by Sam Shepard through the play-*The Late Henry Moss*, where one can see the individuals with multiple-fractured psyche. The meaning of 'I' the self which has been the aspiration of American individuality remains a dream in reality and the entire society is

being placed in a “dark house” which they have themselves turned into. Thus, *The Late Henry Moss* highlights all postmodern concerns, ‘happening’ or ‘happened’ in America.

In *The Late Henry Moss*, the life of Moss family members becomes meaningless and insignificant. The characters feel they live an absurd life. They lose hope and confidence over their lives and feel their life is worthless. They have no purpose of living and become aimless. As Ray says to Taxi, “You’re nothing. Just like me. An empty nothing. A couple of nothings whose lives have never amounted to anything and never will” (2000:34). Throughout the play, characters become sad and depressed. This is the feature of postmodern world, where people are alienated from each other and even from themselves. There is a deep lack of communication and everything seems absurd and futile. Henry after beating his wife runs away. He feels alienated and isolated both from his family and the society. In the third act of the play, Henry says that he remembers the day when he ran out and felt himself cut off from everything. He drove aimlessly without any fixed destination but with the ‘aim’ of escaping to underline the basic feature of the post-modern American society- alienation.

The life of Henry becomes meaningless and absurd. He has lost his destination and feels a sense of alienation from the whole world. He is dead both emotionally and spiritually the same night when he runs out of home, and when he dies physically after twenty-five years, is just a formality. Ionesco defines the terminology of absurd as, “that which is devoid of purpose. ...cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, and useless”(Qtd. in Esslin 1986: 23).

The protagonists in Sam Shepard’s plays fight a losing battle to extricate themselves from the patriarchal patterns of alcoholism, abandonment and violence. In *The Late Henry Moss*, Henry is the head of the family, who has some fundamental duties towards his family. He should take care of his family but instead he beats his wife and runs away which makes him live a life of exile. Patriarchal authority which is the base of the traditional family fails here because the father’s role is opposite to that of the traditional ‘breadwinner’ father. He fails to be a successful father and a husband resulting in the family’s collapse. Shepard here shows, how the father figure himself becomes the reason for the disintegration of American family. When he fails in playing his role as a father and husband, he abandons his family and becomes violent resulting in the breakdown of the whole family. Ray also tries to escape the patriarchal patterns and wants to be quite different from his father. But all his efforts and attempts seem to be futile and absurd for he fails to define his identity in the end and becomes like his father.

The effect of the post-traumatic experience has not only left individuals in absurdity but, also eroded their self-identity. The identity of characters in the Moss family is under assault, especially the mother’s identity. The mother has no role to perform in the play. She does not even make one appearance in the play. She falls victim to patriarchal violence as Henry uses and abuses her and that is the only thing the reader comes to know about her. She doesn’t speak a single sentence for herself in the whole play and the readers do not even know her name. She loses her

identity at the hands of her wayward and cruel patriarch. Sam Shepard presents here a kind of simulation of how women are being used, abused and assaulted in the postmodern American family. They do not enjoy their rights and fall a victim to the patriarchal system. The identities of Earl and Ray are also under assault. Earl, the elder son of Henry, lacks the courage to protect his mother and runs in terror the fateful evening, when Henry beats his mother. Ray also could not defend his mother for he is too young. He expects Earl to protect her as he is elder. Ray tells Earl about his expectation in the third act of the play and reminds him of the past when the elder male figures abandoned the family. Ray is also compelled to run away from the family for he is psychologically affected. For him, the "... identity has been under pressure from the (de)formative experience of watching the family disintegrate and his own subsequent withdrawal" (Roudane 2002: 283).

The characters in this play are in search of new identity. The play presents the conflict, between the son (protagonist) and the father, which evolves the whole play. Ray, the protagonist tries to extricate himself from the patterns of alcoholism, abuse, abandonment and violence of his father, the patriarch. He doesn't want to be like his father. He struggles to establish the new identity of his own different from that of his father. So, he denies his past and his family in order to escape the heredity and legacy of his father. He keeps himself away from his family for the most time. Cultural legacy plays an important role in forming one's identity. So, when he tries to deny his heredity he loses his identity. As in the play, Establen tells Earl: Henry, he asks me about my pueblo—where I come from. My people, my family. He never talks about himself. He says he has no past. Mostly we just listen. Dogs. Coyotes. *La música*. It was peaceful (2000:54). Sam Shepard seems to be highly aggressive in his attack against the post-modern American society. Far from being a person who can brag about American society as positive heart-warming society that can boost of upholding and practising the much cherished ideals of individualism, he is with a scathing attack of censure against it. He falsifies the ideal like that of the life of American dream as a fantasy. Rather than, owning and celebrating their belonging, they conceal their belongingness as something formidable, shameful and gnawing, better to be forgotten and erased from memory.

5. Debunking the myth of American family

Sam Shepard also depicts the relationship between reality and illusion by showing what is true and what is not true (myth) about American family. Therefore, he debunks the myth of American family through the characters who often deny their past in the world of illusions. In *The Late Henry Moss*, Earl often denies his past in order to escape the heredity and legacy of the family. As in the beginning of the play Earl tells Ray "... Well, you know me, Ray—I was never one to live in the past. That was never my deal. You know—you remember how I was" (2000:6). Earl also refuses that he forsakes Ray and their mother on that day when "He" beat her and left. Ray then takes the rest of the time proving that Earl has misinterpreted the events of their father's last days until, in the last scene, the truth is finally revealed. Ray tries to escape his past and heredity but he finds himself pulled back into the family and eventually transformed into

the nightmarish patriarch that he sought to avoid. He also becomes violent and abusive like his father. He beats his brother until Earl cannot walk forcing him to clean the floor of the father's kitchen as if to wipe away the decay that the father has left and transform it into a clean setting that he, as well as his mother, would appreciate:

Ray: Get up off the floor!! [*Ray kicks Earl hard in the ribs. Earl struggles to the downstage chair and drags himself up into it. Esteban keeps stirring.*] You know what I think? I think it's time we straightened up in here, don't you? Get a little order. I mean if I'm gonna be living here I'd like to have a little order. Scrub the floors maybe. The windows. Brighten the place up a bit. What do you think? How 'bout it, Esteban? You got a bucket around? A mop? [*Pause. Esteban and Earl stare at him like he's lost his mind.*] (2000:95)

Ray too has transformed into the patriarch or is trapped by the past acts that his father (patriarch) has done. By battling with his brother, Earl is trying to run away from or deny his true self. This self-denial is a never ending cycle of lies that they cannot get free of until they accept who they are. They don't know even who they are, and they not only deny their selves but lie to themselves and this leads to their disaster. Escaping one's own heredity or legacy is just another lie of the mind. In other words, one cannot escape from reality or where one comes from, no matter how far one runs away. In an interview, with Carol Rosen, Shepard states his belief that one cannot deny his/her own family:

So many people get screwed up because they try to deny them, try to say I'm not like my father; I'm not like my mother. ...When, in fact, there's nothing you can do about it. I think that there is no escape that the wholehearted acceptance of it leads to another possibility. But the possibility of somehow miraculously making myself into a different person is a hoax, a futile game (2003:8).

In this play, all characters try to forget their past and family in order to establish their new identities. They enter into the world of fantasy in order to escape the realities of the past and search their new identities. But in the end they become what they sought to avoid. They can't escape from their past and heredity. Regarding the powerful impact of past, Shepard argues that Americans must acknowledge the influential effect of the past and admit to the truth of that history in order to recover any sense of identity, national or individual.

Shepard argues that when one tries to forget the past he has to lie in order to escape from it and attain a new identity. This leads them away from the reality into the mythic world resulting in the crises. On the one hand, he makes a critique of the postmodern American family; on the other, he argues that the Americans must face the reality, in order to get rid of these problems. They must not escape or deny the reality, denying only makes the situation worse, whereas by accepting one's past, family, and heredity one can move on to live free from repeating the past and falling victim to it.

The lies of the family go deeper than just what has been presented since Henry's death as in the words of Matthew Roudane, "The buried truths of the past, repressed through years of denial and subterfuge, are sources of disconnection in the family" (2002: 289). The characters are placed in a severe battle in which they must face with the reality of the

American life. This battle would reveal the realities hidden in their lives. Ray always wants to know the reality behind Henry's death. His pursuit of the truth would give him contentment. In the same manner, looking for the truth of ones being in the society would fetch contentment that would shield American family life from disintegration and violence.

6. Conclusion

Ramifications of war have left no stone unturned, it pervades every aspect of human being. It disintegrates the American family. Like, *True West, The Late Henry Moss* presents the conflict between sons and father, between the parents, and between the brothers which results in the collapse of the family. In this play the conflict between the parents play pivotal role and becomes the root cause of the family's disintegration. The post-trauma has led the characters towards masculinity crisis, especially the patriarchal head of the family. They often experience violence as a result of this crisis. Syed Mohammad Hosseini and Maasoum in his article remarks:

Autonomy is the most important trait that a tough male has to possess. In Shepard's characters, this trait appears as an illusion, although they do everything to support it by their actions. When the characters feel their masculine autonomies are threatened, they become violent and isolated (2012: 252).

Henry tries to be the central figure in the family but does not find his place in the family and this puts his masculine identity in danger, therefore, he abandons the home to have a place of his own. He at the last phase of the play realizes his loss of identity has emerged out of his own deeds, his inability to face the situation in his family.

Through this drama Shepard draws his anguish about American life and its painful aspects. The ghost of Henry highlights the horror of loneliness and sense of alienation. Shepard incorporates the post-traumatic effects of World War II and domestic violence that have reduced human existence to nothingness through Henry, Earl and Ray.

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