

Manifestation of Kristeva's Concepts of "Abjection" and "Thetic Break" in Sam Shepard's *The Buried Child*

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Abstract: *This study probes Kristeva's concepts of abjection, thetic break, the semiotics, and the symbolic in the play The Buried Child written by Sam Shepherd. The image of metamorphosized mother refers to any types of objects which are the transformed version of the mother. In other words, the image of mother is substituted and replaced during thetic break which functions as a threshold between two realms of the semiotic and the symbolic as a break between the signifier and the signified. Kristeva believes that the thetic break is a precondition for entering the symbolic chora and the possibilities of the first enunciation where the subject realizes that his own subjectivity faces boundary and limitation with others. This basic problem is elaborated in this selected play and discussed through Kristevan reading.*

KEY WORDS: Kristeva, Abjection, Thetic Break, the Semiotics, the Symbolic, Shepard's *The Buried Child*

INTRODUCTION

Sam Shepard's works mirror the social, political, and cultural condition of the American society in sixties. In fact, this period of time in America is characterized by civil chaos,

women's rights, ethnic issues, and American values. Shepard's drama is one of the most influential threads in the American contemporary theater. His works cover a large variety of short stories and plays, but he unquestionably has gained his outstanding position in American theater for his spectacular plays. *Buried Child* (1977), Sam Shepard's Pulitzer Prize winner is one of the most controversial family plays written in the 20th Century. The play portrays a family including the father (Dodge), the mother (Halie), two sons (Tilden and Bradley), Tilden's son (Vince) and his girlfriend (Shelly). An old secret is revealed when Vince, Tilden's forgotten son, comes back home after six years; the revelation devastates their lives. The shattered memory of a buried child born of incest of the mother and the elder son haunts the family after years and changes the direction of their lives and the play ends with a new generation hopelessly replacing the older one.

Buried Child (1978), the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1979, along with *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) and *True West* (1980) comprise Sam Shepard's family trilogy. The play revolves around the breakdown of the American family in a context of disillusionment and disappointment. It takes place during an economic depression in the 1970s in America where the sense of inadequacy was dominant in the society. Accordingly, most critics agree that the play pictures the violence that arose in American life from feelings of economical breakdown and inadequacy in postmodernism.

Buried Child is about a middle-class agricultural couple, Halie and Dodge, and their two children, Tilden and Bradley, who live in Illinois in poverty. At the core of the play, there is a failed father character; an impotent mother; two brothers in the struggle; and a tainted secret. The play depicts an unnamed family who has tried to cope with the emotional breakdown brought about because of mother and son committing incest, Halie and Tilden. The family has struggled for so long to forget the horrible event; however, the arrival of Vince, the forgotten son of Tilden and his girlfriend, Shelly, forces them to recall the traumatic event.

The play unfolds three generations of a distorted American family in rural Illinois in 1978. It portrays unconventional behavior and faults that embody inner psychological defects. They show both the void of their contemporary culture and the emptiness of their lives, as Stephen Bottoms notes, this family seeks to create and recreate their appearances. What is important with this play is the presence of the past like a dark shadow in the family. It seems that each character is engaged in some way with the past. For instance, the father, mother, and sons are struggling with the memory of the dead baby who was killed by Dodge. (8) He adds that to make the situation even more complicated, Shepard extends the family distortion to the next generation as well. The parents, then, could be considered as the representative of the past generation, the two sons are the emblem of the present

generation, and the grandson and his beloved are serving to typify the future generation. (Bigsby 13)

The play opens with the image of a paralyzed and irresponsible dysfunctional father who is "very thin and sickly looking, in his late seventies" (*Buried Child* 2). Dodge is an alcoholic father who can barely move and buy his drink. From the very beginning, Shepard shocks the reader with the description of the head of the family. He transfers the picture of a breadwinner to a stay-at-home consumer who demands care and attention. As Susan Faludi suggests "the man controlling his environment is not the prevailing American image of masculinity" (6). By the same token, Shepard claims that "It sounds a little trite, but there's not a whole lot of men who know what a man is, and I always thought it weird that American men haven't resolved this; the American male is in conflict, uniquely in cultures of the West" (Crank 53).

METHOD AND APPROACH

The main purpose of the research is the better comprehension of Kristeva's psychoanalytic and social concepts by applying them to the selected play. Kristeva's theory of abjection is the theoretical basis for this study, which she has expounded on in her 1982 book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Much of this book is devoted to the various strategies patriarchal societies develop to exercise power on women. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva emphasizes that women's abject conditions are not an indispensable quality of their essence but are culturally imposed on them. This study shows that the characters are looking for their mothers or true replacement for them in the form of metamorphosized mothers so this problem needs elaboration and analysis as the main problem which can be done through Kristevan reading. Metaphoric use of incest, murder, and sexual harassment can also be interpreted regarding the notions of abjection, the semiotic, and the symbolic. The act of separation between the children and the parent can be interpreted via Kristeva's theory of thetic break. Marriage is an act of thetic break in symbolic stage in which regularities must be organized and ordered. The characters go through a thetic break in which they have to abject their maternal mother. However, their semiotic desires accompany them into the symbolic stage; therefore, they are supposed to find imaginary fathers and love during the thetic break. Although they are forced to find love according to social rules of the symbolic codes, like marriage and normal dating, they fail. Therefore, they revolt against the dogmas of the symbolic order, and to some extent, they can find their metamorphosized mother. According to Kristeva, chora and semiotics are the sites of all physical drives; however, for Kristeva, chora plays a more significant role since it is a site "from which the semiotic bursts forth" (Stokes-king 61). Moreover, these two concepts are interrelated, and chora would be regarded as "a site for the infant's relation to her/his mother's body and this kind of identification with the mother's body is one of the aspects of the semiotic" (Sabo 48).

Therefore, the bodily drives of characters in the selected plays would be investigated to depict chora and semiotics. The characters' drives and impulses can be contradictory since they are both "oriented constructively" and "destructive by themselves" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 27).

According to Kristeva, all the characters' employ words to express their desires. Kristeva considers chora as a "non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their states in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated" and this motility precedes generating the meaning and the signifying practice (Kristeva 25). Its vocal and gestural organization is subject to what we shall call an objective ordering, which is dictated by natural or socio-historical constraints such as the biological difference between the sexes or family structure. Moreover, thetic break is another significant step that is going to be depicted throughout different stages. At first, the child uses gestures and sounds to express herself/himself, but s/he is not aware that these utterances have their own distinctive meaning. Later on, the child realizes that not only she can use language to indicate objects but also s/he realizes that s/he is separate from other people and his surroundings. Kristeva calls this stage the thetic break (43). It is the first step to understand the independent subjectivity through which the symbolic language which "posits discourse between subject and object comes into being" (Stokes-king 37). Through the thetic break, the child enters the social world, the social norms, and the symbolic realm. In fact, "the thetic is the precondition for both enunciation and denotation" (Kristeva 53).

According to Kristeva, chora and semiotic are the site of all physical drives; however, for Kristeva, chora plays a more significant role since it is a site "from which the semiotic bursts forth" (Stokes-king 61). Moreover, these two concepts are interrelated, and chora would be regarded as "a site for the infant's relation to her/his mother's body and this kind of identification with the mother's body is one of the aspects of the semiotic" (Sabo 48). Therefore, the bodily drives of characters in the selected plays would be investigated to depict chora and semiotic. The characters' drives and impulses can be contradictory since they are both "oriented in a constructive way" and "destructive by themselves" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 27). Consequently, the contradiction between the characters' desires must be found and analyzed.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva claims that abjection is wrongly put on women. She believes that women are not essentially an abject being; rather, it is the patriarchal society which gives them a degraded position.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Sam Shepard's play *Buried Child* is set in a farm in Illinois and portrays an estranged family with an uncertain past. The family is completely dysfunctional but they all attempt to live a normal life without mentioning the past. The characters seem to be not sure of what has happened and are in confused. Many critics have asserted the postmodern nature of Sam Shepard's plays, and have categorized *Buried Child* as a postmodern work. Both Malkin (1999) and Schmidt (2005) have pointed to the postmodern anxiety. Schmidt has said about the play to be indicative of Lyotard's the "postmodern condition".

Buried Child is about a middle-class agricultural couple, Halie and Dodge, and their two children, Tilden and Bradley, who live in Illinois in poverty. At the core of the play, there is a failed father character; an impotent mother; two brothers in struggle; and a tainted secret. The play depicts an unnamed family who has tried to cope with the emotional breakdown brought about because of mother and son's committing incest, Halie and Tilden. The family has struggled for so long to forget the horrible event; however, the arrival of Vince, the forgotten son of Tilden and his girlfriend, Shelly, forces them to recall the traumatic event. In fact, the play unfolds three generations of a distorted American family in rural Illinois in 1978. It portrays unconventional behavior and faults that embody inner psychological defects. They show both the void of their contemporary culture and the emptiness of their lives, as Stephen Bottoms notes, this family "Seek to create and recreate their personal appearances. What is important with this play is the presence of the past like a dark shadow in the family.

It seems that each character is engaged in some way with the past which stands for the semiotics. For instance, the father, mother and sons are struggling with the memory of the dead baby who was killed by Dodge." He adds that to make the situation even more complicated, Shepard extends the family distortion to the next generation as well. The parents, then, could be considered as the representative of the past generation, the two sons are the emblem of present generation, the grandson and his beloved are serving to typify the future generation. Stephen Bottoms further continues the grandson and his beloved are engaged with the image of a united and heartfelt family. The very illusion blocks the characters' vision to comprehend the reality; therefore, pushes the family towards the split. "Many of them manipulate an ever-shifting series of roles and masks; thereby, suggesting the absence of any underlying sense of the self." (Bottoms 15).

Discolusure of Thetic Break

The subject who is immersed in semiotic maternal chora, experiences the 'thetic break' by the help of 'imaginary father'. The 'thetic break' is a kind of precondition for entering into symbolic chora and the possibilities of the first enunciation. There is no sign that is not

‘thetic’, as Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1986) posits: “thetic phase marks a threshold between two realms; the semiotic and the symbolic, the second includes part of the first and the scission is marked by the break between signifier and signified” (48). In other words, “the thetic break separates the signifier from what is heterogeneous to it” (55). As clarified above, ‘thetic break’ regulates the semiotic in language, but the pivotal point is that it can also regulate the irregularities in society. There are many events in societies that are considered as thetic events. The most important of them is tension among the family members.

The play opens with the image of a paralyzed and irresponsible dysfunctional father who is “very thin and sickly looking, in his late seventies” (*Buried Child* 2). Dodge is an alcoholic father who can barely move and buy his own drink. From the very beginning Shepard shocks the reader by the description of a head of the family. He transfers the picture of a bread-winner to a stay-at-home consumer who demands care and attention. As Susan Faludi suggests “the man controlling his environment is not the prevailing American image of masculinity” (*Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* 6). By the same token, Shepard claims that “It sounds a little trite, but there’s not a whole lot of men who know what a man is, and I always thought it weird that American men haven’t resolved this; the American male is in conflict, uniquely in cultures of the West” (James A. Crank 53). One of the reasons that the kids of the family suffer from mental breakdowns in their lives is that in the thetic break, the figure of the father is broken and weak for them, so once they are separated from the mother in the Semiotics, the father’s image is broken for them. As a result, they have to find another image as the dominant figure and substitution in the thetic break process.

Dodge is not dominant in the family; in fact, the dominance has shifted to Halie. She denies Dodge of his manhood when she reminds him of the affairs she has gone through. She addresses her husband saying that “Everything was dancing with life” (*Buried Child* 7). She advances that her companion was “a wonderful man. A breeder” (*Buried Child* 7). Dodge’s reaction to Halie’s infidelity is quite surprising when he responds “And he never laid a finger on you I suppose? This gentleman breeder-man” (*Buried Child* 8). Dodge’s masculinity is questioned and humiliated over the course of the play. According to Carla McDonough, Dodge “is clearly no longer able to control his wife’s actions, much less the actions of his sons, due to his physical frailty—aggravated if not created by drink—which has confined him to the couch. The family patriarch’s failings as a ‘man’ are reflected in the dissolution of his family and the failings of his sons” (53).

Dodge’s dominance over the family is challenged and negated not only by his wife but also by his children. In fact, due to the weak figure of the father, the children have to experience their chora to reach their independence in another way which is shown metaphorically.

Tilden, the eldest son of the family, emasculates his father first by having an affair with his mother; then by harvesting corn in the backyard—where Dodge was unable to farm it for many years. Dodge is surprised when he witnesses corn in Tilden's hand "There hasn't been corn out there since about nineteen thirty-five! That's the last time I planted corn out there" (*Buried Child* 14). The following conversation with Shelly uncovers that Dodge used to be a great farmer, but he prefers not to accept his past:

DODGE. That isn't me! That never was me! This is me. Right here. This is it. The whole shootin' match, sittin' right here in front of you. That other stuff was a sham.

SHELLY. So the past never happened as far as you're concerned?

DODGE. The past? Jesus Christ. The past is passed. What do you know about the past?

SHELLY. Not much. I know there was a farm. (*Pause.*)

DODGE. A farm?

SHELLY. There's a picture of a farm. A big farm. A bull. Wheat. Corn. (*Buried Child* 86)

Furthermore, the youngest son of the family, Bradley, is another threat for Dodge. This is quite revealing when Dodge desperately asks Tilden not to leave him; otherwise, Bradley will shave his head:

DODGE. Bradley'll shave my head if I don't have that on. That's my cap.

TILDEN. I know it is.

DODGE. Don't take my cap off.

TILDEN. I won't.

DODGE. You stay right here now. (*Buried Child* 34)

This is the metaphoric role during chora and thetic break that the family experiences and Dodge wants to avoid his father image. Kristeva remarks that between the chora and the mirror stage occurs a pre-linguistic stage that she connects with the abject. During this time, a separation between the subject and the maternal body is established by the subject him/herself. The subject produces those borders between him/herself and other before the entrance into language. The threat of falling back into the stage of the chora causes fear and horror in the subject because it means giving up all the linguistic structures by which he enters the symbolic world of meaning. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva regards the stage of abjection as "a precondition of narcissism" which is to say, a precondition for the narcissism of the mirror stage, which comes next (13). Beings do not come into the world as separate subjects. According to Kristeva, there is no border when the child comes into being; it is in a realm of oneness with its environment, and of the semiotic chora. As Lacan states, subjectivity appears when an infant at some point between six and eighteen months of age sees an image of himself in a mirror, what he terms the "Ideal-I". This recognition of the self's image happens before the entrance into language after which the subject can understand the place of that image of the self within a larger social order in which the subject must negotiate his or her relationship with others (Dino 4).

Dodge's "hair is cut extremely short and in places the scalp is cut and bleeding" (*Buried Child* 39) represents the emasculation of Dodge's dominant role in the family. The declining stereotypical parental responsibility is evident when Dodge, instead of being supportive, is hostile towards his children—especially towards Bradley. A relevant example is when Dodge accompanies Shelly to beat his own son, Bradley:

DODGE. Bradley? (*Looks at Bradley.*) He's a push-over. 'Specially now. All ya gotta do is take his wooden leg and throw it out the back door. Helpless. Totally helpless. (*Shelly turns and stares at Bradley's wooden leg then looks at Dodge. She sips bouillon.*)

SHELLY. You'd do that? Me? I've hardly got the strength to breathe.

DODGE. Me? I've hardly got the strength to breathe.

SHELLY. But you'd actually do it if you could? DODGE. Don't be so easily shocked, girlie. There's nothing a man can't do. You dream it up and he can do it. Anything. It boggles the imagination. (*Buried Child* 82-83)

Dodge is hostile because he is helpless and unable to change the current situation for the better. The only thing he can do is to avoid sleeping since he thinks that some harm will befall whenever he goes to sleep. He does not trust his family and tries to protect himself by staying awake

DODGE. Every time I lay down something happens! (*Whips off his cap, points at his head.*) Look what happens! My head is what happens! (*Pulls his cap back on.*) You go lay down and see what happens to you! See how you like it! They'll steal your bottle! They'll cut your hair! They'll murder your children! That's what'll happen. They'll eat you alive. (*Buried Child* 56)

The most shocking scene is when Dodge reveals Haile and Tilden's incestuous relationship as follows:

Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us. He'd walk for miles with the kid in his arms. Halie let him take it. All night sometimes. He'd walk all night out there in the pasture with it. Talkin' to it. Singin' to it. Used to hear him singing to it. He'd make up stories. He'd tell that kid all kinds a stories. Even when he knew it couldn't understand him. We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothing'. Everything was canceled out by this one mistake. This one weakness. (*Buried Child* 63)

This shocking scene has a metaphoric importance during thetic break as the incestuous relationship refers to the desire for the unity in the semiotics. Since after the thetic break, Tilden could realize that the figure of father is broken for him, so he is not able to reach subjectivity. He yearns for the semiotics which is depicted in the metaphoric sense and incestuous relationship between the characters.

Revelation of Abjection: Abjected Mother in *Buried Child*

Shepard has ruined a general notion of family in which the father is expected to be considered the breadwinner; the mother, the back bone for the family; and the children, obedient and sympathetic to their parents. According to family system theory, individuals who shut themselves off both from other members in the family and from the outside world—neither attached, nor independent—are doomed to dysfunction. As mentioned earlier, Shepard has depicted three dysfunctional generations in this play: husband and wife; children; and grandson whose roles have changed fundamentally in postmodern family. Having discussed the dysfunction of the first generation of the family, the following paragraphs analyze the second and third generation, children and grandson, and their disintegration which is quite revealing in their relationship with the members of the family. Tilden and Bradley are at extremes, one being indifferent and irresponsible—like Tilden; the other being aggressive and hostile—like Bradley. Tilden, who is also a father, returns home from New Mexico since he was unable to comprehend his status as a grown-up. he says, “I thought I was dying but I just lost my voice” (31). In the following extract, Tilden narrates his reason for his return as shallow as possible

TILDEN. I was standing. It was night. I was full of the smell of New Mexico. It's different than Illinois. Totally different. Foreign, almost. My lungs were full of it. Like pine smoke and mesquite. That was it. It was foreign. So I left there and I came back here. (*He starts to leave.*) (*Buried Child* 32)

He is a representative of a broken man who has attempted to follow his dreams but returned to his family after twenty years. His non-recognition of his own son exacerbates the situation for a new generation father. It is when Shelly reminds him “This is supposed to be your son! Is he your son? Do you recognize him! [...] I thought everybody knew each other!” (*Buried Child* 90). Surprisingly enough, Tilden's answer is emotionless “I had a son once but we buried him” (91). In “Sam Shepard and the Familial Maze,” it is truly asserted that Tilden's position as an all-American high school football star, who fails to live up to his expectations, escapes to the West and then returns home in despair. (Amani 74). What is so pivotal is that, after his entrance into the world, Tilden becomes a subject-in-process who tries to discard his mother. At first, this relentless deed seems impossible, but he is forced to do so in order to own the symbolic stage, of course by the considerable assistance of imaginary father in forgiving him for committing such a deed. As a matter of fact, Tilden as a rebellious child is enthusiastically in search of his mother's love and can never forget it, though the feeling. In another part of the play, one can observe the lack of reciprocity, while her mother speaks about her feeling for Tilden, it shows the attraction to the semiotics. She is a mother who is afraid of her alien child; still, her peculiar boy is too dependent on her to dispense with her.

On the other hand, Bradley is both emotionally and physically dysfunctional. He has a wooden leg without which, he becomes like a powerless child in the family. In act three when Shelly steals Bradley's wooden leg, he appears to be a grown-up child. He screams childishly, "Mom! Mom! She's got my leg! She's taken my leg! I never did anything to her! She's stolen my leg!" (*Buried Child* 120).

Shepard has intensified Bradley's weakness to the point of total emasculation by "eliminating most of his lines in act 3 and acknowledging the extreme helplessness the loss of his leg brings him" (Crank 78). Although Dodge refers to him as a "dead wood," he turns into a hostile character when he has his wooden leg. In fact, Bradley attempts to usurp his dying father's position by killing him, "We could shoot him. (*Laughs.*) Put him out of his misery" (*Buried Child* 77). At the end of the second act Shelly asks Bradley what they need to do with Dodge, again he reveals that Dodge must die: "We could shoot him. We could drown him. What about drowning him?" (*Buried Child* 102).

The disintegration on the side of Bradley is well depicted when in a violent act he asks Shelly to open her mouth so that he can put his hand inside it. When Haile chastises him, Bradley denies by saying that "I never did anything, Mom! I never touched her! She propositioned me! And I turned her down. I turned her down flat! She's not my type. You know that Mom" (*Buried Child* 99). It should be noted that Bradley is used to deny the truth because he was born and brought up in a family where denial was typical. Accordingly, Benjamin Oipari remarks:

To hide their glaring dysfunction and relieve their anxiety, the Shepard family creates dishonest stories so routinely that all truth becomes subjective. These stories take the form of myths. Typical of families who hide a shameful secret, they perpetuate a myth of happiness and perfection to mask their disgrace and to make them appear functional to the outside. (127)

Bradley is forceful in his effort to keep the secret, "I'm not telling her anything! Nothing's wrong here! Nothing's ever been wrong! Everything's the way it's supposed to be! Nothing ever happened that's bad. Everything is all right here! We're all good people! We've always been good people. Right from the very start" (*Buried Child* 102).

By loving others instead of the mother, the children can probably make their psychic cycle perfect, and as a result, can forgive the father for replacing her mother with other females. Ann-Marie Smith in her book *Speaking The Unspeakable* (1988) claims that: "loving father, who is as a figure, for child's process of identification, will enable the boy to displace desire onto other women" (92). Characters such as Shelly are Bradley's imaginary father. In other words, she is his conglomerate of mother and father who assist him in

substituting his mother's love for other women's. It seems that Bradley, through the lovely support of those who present him with love and enable him to abandon his mother, becomes able to transfer all the jouissance of primary identification to his imaginary fathers.

Kristeva puts that the importance of imaginary father is so prominent even in subject's adulthood: "Kristeva sees imaginary father as a fantasy of wholeness, adults seek the wholeness in a form of couple, so adult's love in the form of couple, homo or hetero is a recreation of the imaginary father, who once again turns out to be mother" (Oliver 80). As it is clear, nearly all characters of the two plays have sexual experiences. The main reason for the existence of such loves is that, all of them are subjects in process who are very eager to have a complete and perfect psychic cycle, of course by the aid of imaginary father, whom they lacked in their childhood. Probably, they did not have the necessary element for becoming a perfect subject, and now in their adulthood they are craving for it. Therefore, the adults' aim is to compensate for their lack by making amorous relationship with their partners.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed the plot and characterization of the *Buried Child* in terms of Kristeva's concepts of *Abjection and Thetic Break*. Instability stems from the fact that contradictions among institutionalized responsibility, collective responsibility and individual responsibility are normalized rather than solved. The family is harmed by the traumatic event, throughout *Buried Child*. The play dramatizes three dysfunctional generations affected by that event of abjection. The plurality of center is accompanied by hiding a secret which lead to dysfunction. Kristeva conjures up three patterns of identification: identification with the father and the symbolic, identification with the mother and the semiotic, and a rejection of either identification which results in a precarious balance in between. He establishes a separation between himself and the mother and creates boundaries between self and others to enter into realm of language. There is no border between the child and its surroundings when it comes into being. He is in a realm of oneness with the environment and the semiotic chora shared by the mother and the child before the emergence of the thetic stage that prepares the sign for emergence into the symbolic order. The maternal body is the site of the abject. The abject in this play is seen in the context of the semiotic and is repressed upon entry into the symbolic order.

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