

Abusive Family Relationships in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Shepard's *Buried Child*

Since abusive family relationships are destructive and could lead to the ultimate collapse of the family, which is the nucleus of humanity, a large number of playwrights, as well as novelists, poets, and essayists from all over the world have dealt with the theme of family abuse in their writings in order to attract the attention to its disastrous impact. The core of this study, in fact, is to investigate the aspects of domestic violence, being a dangerous global phenomenon, as reflected in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Shepard's *Buried Child*. This thesis is a criticism of such family maladies as the irresponsibility, stupidity and injustice of parents against their sons as well as the vulgarity of sons against their parents as both Shakespeare (1564-1616) and Shepard (1943-) depict in these two plays.

This study also tries to find out the similarities and dissimilarities between these two famous family plays in terms of the treatment of the theme of abusive family relationships. Though written by two different playwrights, who belong to two different ethnicities and two distant eras, the two plays have something in common. This thesis also highlights the greatness of both Shakespeare and Shepard who could attract the attention of their countries and the whole world to domestic abuse as the most fatal problem that threatens the stability and the future of mankind. Additionally, the study stresses the universality of domestic abuse as an eternal issue that originated when Cain killed his brother, Abel.

King Lear, arguably the second to Shakespeare's best tragedy, *Hamlet*, and as one of his greatest tragedies which include, in addition to *Hamlet*, two other plays, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, was first produced on December,

1606. About this play, Dr. Johnson writes, "The tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed; which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity" (qtd in Ramji Lall, William Shakespeare, King Lear, New Delhi: Rama Brothers Educational Publishers, 1985, p.30). Praising *King Lear*, A. C. Bradley states, *King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievements . . ." (Lall, 30).

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare depicts the horrible images of domestic tensions caused by the misconduct of such abusive characters as Lear and Gloucester, the foolishly unjust but miserable fathers; Goneril and Regan, the two ungrateful daughters; and Edmund, the greedy disloyal bastard son to his father as well as to his brother, Edgar. Shakespeare also introduces such faithful, sincere and loyal characters as Cordelia, Edgar and Kent. Then he shows how all victimizers are severely punished by the end of the play, where we see Lear going mad after loosing all what he owns and being dismissed by his two hard-hearted daughters. Lear's suffering reaches its climax when he appears carrying the dead body of Cordelia in the final scene of the play. Gary Taylor, in *The guardian* (London), comments on this mourning situation of Lear when he comments:

This moment moves most spectators to tears. I can't speak for everyone in the theatre, but I'm never, never, never, never weeping for Cordelia. I'm weeping for a father, carrying his dead daughter (his favorite daughter), talking to the corpse as though she were alive, still his little girl. (p.16)

We also notice how Gloucester joins Lear in the storm after being blinded by Earl of Cornwall with the help of Edmund, his illegitimate son.

Almost all characters, victims or victimizers, helplessly suffer in *King Lear*. In the main plot, Lear, the old King of Denmark, is shocked by the selfishness and ingratitude of his two daughters, Goneril and Regan, who publicly show severe cruelty and ultimate savagery against him although he has just divided all his properties between them. Unable to believe what happens, he leaves the palaces of his two daughters and goes mad. Abusive scenarios of these two wicked women against their father are so many. The first scenario happens when Goneril who, fed up with her father during the first month of his stay in her palace, tells him, in a very impolite and ungrateful way, that she cannot resist the disorder caused by

him and his large number of knights, and that she no longer wants to keep him in her palace any more:

Here do you keep a hundred knights and
squires; Men so disordered, so debosh'd, and
bold,
That this our court, infected with their manners,
Shows like a riotous end

(I. i. 238-241)

Very much annoyed with Goneril, Lear curses her thus: how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is / To have a thankless child! Away, Away! (I. iv. 286-287). Feeling disappointed by her brutal conduct against him, Lear decides to leave Goneril's palace and live with Regan. He falsely imagines that Regan might respect him and look after him as her father, who has given her half of his kingdom, or even sympathize with him as a helpless old man. Instead, she refuses to let him stay with her and advises him to return to Goneril and stay in her palace. In a very melancholic tone, Lear blames Regan and expresses his plight in the following lines:

No, Regan, Thou shalt never have my curse:
Thy tender-hefted nature shall not give
Thee o'er to harshness: her eyes are fierce, but
thine
Do comfort and not burn. . . .
Thy half o' th' kingdom hast thou not forget,
Wherein I thee endow'd.

(II. iv. 168-171, 178-179)

In opposition to their helpless father, both Goneril and Regan unite and decide to torture him until he departs them. Even when Lear complains to Regan about Goneril's abusive conduct towards him during his stay in her palace, instead of giving him relief or the chance for a pleasant stay with her, Regan defends Goneril's ungrateful behavior and advises him to beg Goneril to live with her again. Disappointed and disgusted by Regan's reaction, Lear responds:

You think I'll weep;
No, I'll not weep:
I have full cause of weeping, . . .
But this heart
Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
Or ere I'll weep. O Fool! I shall go mad.

(II. Iv. 280-283)

The sin Lear has committed against his youngest daughter, Cordelia, when he disinherits her of his properties causes his suffering, homelessness and helplessness. Now he faces two storms: the real furious storm, which is struggling thunder and lightning, and his rebellious daughters who dismiss him exactly like what he has done with Cordelia when he exempts her from his properties and dismisses her from his kingdom. Lamenting his shameful and critical state of mind, Lear comments:

You owe me no subscription: then let fall
Your horrible pleasure; here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old man.
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engender'd battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. (III. ii. 17-24)

As Shepard does in his *Buried Child* when he moves from the specific to the general or from the personal to the public, Shakespeare, in this play, moves from what is personal and national to what is general and global. According to Nicholas Marsh, in his book titled Shakespeare: The Tragedies:

The storm 'heard at a distance' in line 282 dramatically coincides with the storm in Lear's heart prefiguring the storm on the heath and Lear's madness in the next act. So, the tragic forces tearing the hero apart are expanded as external phenomena: individual tragedy rocks the world. (p.68)

The stupidity of parents causes the misery of their sons. Falsely convinced by Edmund's forged letter which accuses Edgar of planning to get rid of his father, Earl of Gloucester disinherits Edgar, his legitimate son, and dismisses him from his kingdom. Lear's injustice against Cordelia in the main plot is similar to Gloucester's action against Edgar in the subplot. Both Cordelia and Edgar are victimized by their fathers' irrational decisions. There are many scenarios of the suffering of these two innocent characters. In his famous soliloquy in Act Three, Scene Six, Edgar, after realizing that Lear's cruel daughters cause his misery, feels a little bit of relief and tries to adapt himself to his critical situation. He

realizes that he is not the only miserable person in life. Commenting on the cruelty of his father towards him and the similar critical situation of Lear with his daughters, Edgar declares:

When we our betters see bearing our woes,
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
Who alone suffers, suffers most I 'th' mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind;
But then the mind much sufferance doth
o'erskip,
When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
How light and portable my pain seems now,
When that which makes me bend mates the
king bow; (III. vi.
100-108)

Sympathizing with Edgar's wretched state, where he appears almost naked in that very stormy day, Lear tells Kent, his loyal counselor, that Edgar must have similar abusive daughters like his own. Lear's following speech is very impressive:

Death, traitor! Nothing could have subd'd
nature
To such a lowness but his unkind daughters.
It is the fashion that discarded fathers
Should have thus little mercy on their flesh?
Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot
Those pelican daughters. (III. iv. 69-74)

But as kind as Cordelia who, according to Amy Wolf, in her article titled "Shakespeare and Harsnett, 'Pregnant to Good Pity'?", "prays to the gods to restore [her father and] . . . cries for an exorcism of the madness that consumes him (p. 4)," and Kent, Edgar, being in disguise, offers to lead his father, Gloucester, who, blinded by Cornwall for a charge of treason, thinks to commit suicide because he could not resist the impact of the accusation. In fact Gloucester's fate is very similar to Lear's, since both are miserable.

In addition to the parent/son abusive relationships, we have some aspects of the wife/husband tensions in *King Lear*. Goneril is wicked with both her father and her husband, Duke of Albany. Her conduct towards Albany is so torturing that she scolds him by calling him a coward "milk-livered man". Insulting her husband, in a nasty tone, Goneril utters:

Milk-liver'd man!
That bear'st a cheek for blows, a head for
wrongs;
Who hast not in thy brows an eye discerning
Thine honor from thy suffering; that not
know'st
Fools do those villains pity who are punish'd
Ere they have done their mischief. (IV. ii. 50-
55)

Reacting to Goneril's brutal behavior towards him and condemning her barbarous deed against her father, Albany says:

Thou changed and self-cover'd thing, for
shame,
Be-monster not thy feature. Were it my fitness
To let these hands obey my blood,
They are apt enough to dislocate and tear
Thy flesh and bones; howe'er thou art a fiend,
A woman's shape doth shield thee. (IV. ii. 62-
67)

Unlike Shepard, who usually ends his tragedies with a glimpse of hope, Shakespeare usually prefers disastrous and bloody endings for his tragedies in order to be logical and convincing. The final scene of *king Lear*, for instance, is highly impressive. Let's imagine how horrible and unforgettable the scene of Lear carrying the dead body of Cordelia after being hanged by Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son. In this terrible situation, Lear laments the death of Cordelia with grief, and he wishes she would be still alive to ask her for forgiveness, but in vain. Revealing his feelings to his audience, Lear mourns thus:

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no
more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button: thank you sir.
(V. iii. 304-308)

Unlike the artificial reconciliation that Shepard intentionally does at the end of his *Buried Child*, justice has been achieved at the end of *King*

Lear, where the victimizers turn to be victims who are mercilessly punished. Both Lear and Gloucester, being easily deceived by a party of their sons, suffer; the first goes mad, and the second is blinded. The word "blinded" reflects, not only Gloucester's loss of his eyesight, but it also shows his inability, like that of Lear himself, to realize the truth or to be guided to the right path. Neville Newman, in his article titled "Shakespeare's *King Lear*", explains this idea when he declares, "Although Cornwall's willingness to foster Edmund is motivated by a misplaced sense of loyalty, . . . he would in all likelihood have been "a dearer father" to Edmund. Ironically, both men's eventual willingness to accept Edmund confirms their parental ineptitude—a feature that they share with Lear." Gloucester himself states:

Love cools, friendship falls off,
brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries
discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond
crack'd
'twixt son and father. This villain of mine
comes
under the prediction; there's son against father:
the
king falls from bias of nature; there's father
against child. (I. ii. 100-109)

The father/daughter abusive relationship is very apparent in *King Lear*. The first abusive family relationship in this play takes place when Lear makes his decision to disinherit Cordelia from her share of his properties and dismiss her from his kingdom. Looking with severe anger to her, Lear utters: Here I disclaim all my paternal care, / Propinquity and property, / and as a stranger to my heart and me / Hold thee from this for ever (I. i. 112-115) Kent faithfully advises Lear not to do that but Lear insists on degrading his youngest daughter from all advantages with no fault committed on her past at all. The decorative flattery of his two cunning elder daughters deceives him and blinds his insight to commit his stupid crime. In the following lines, Kent criticizes Lear's decision:

What would'st thou do, old man?
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to
speak?
When power to flattery bows? To plainness
honour's bound
When majesty falls to folly. Reserve thy state;
And, in thy best consideration, check

This hideous rashness. (I. i. 145-150)

Accordingly, Lear dismisses Kent from his kingdom. Then the King of France shows his astonishment for Lear's irresponsible behavior. Puzzled by Lear's foolish action against the innocent Cordelia, he comments:

This is most strange,
That she, whom even but now was your best
object,
The argument of your, balm of your age,
The best, the dearest, should in the trice of time
Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle
So many folds of your favor. (I. i. 212-
217)

In Shakespeare's plays in general, and in his four great tragedies in particular, women usually have central wicked roles: Some directly torture their partners; others tempt them to do evil and become villains or sinners. Commenting on the fact that most of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists are men and that the tormentor is mostly a woman, a cunning one, Gary Taylor, in *The Guardian* (London), states that:

Shakespeare has provided men with a collection of tragic role-models: Romeo the tragic adolescent, Othello the tragic husband, Hamlet the tragic son, Lear the tragic father, Coriolanus the tragic soldier, Macbeth the tragically overambitious overachiever. There are women around tragic men (p. 16)

King Lear is seemingly regarded to be a political tragedy, where it reflects disorder and chaos at the court of King Lear of Britain as well as the disturbance which prevails Gloucester during the old history of Great Britain. In *The Guardian*, London, Gary Taylor reflects Boyd's viewpoint which regards Shakespearean tragedy as "a politically activist form in that there is an implied moral obligation on the part of the protagonists to change the rottenness of Denmark [in Hamlet] or the decay at the court of King Lear" (p. 16). In this sense, Shakespearean plays are, in general, didactic since they teach mankind some ethical and moral lessons.

Getting a somehow similar reputation like Shakespeare's *King Lear* but in the modern sense, though the gap between the two plays is very wide, *Buried Child*, the Obie and Pulitzer Prize winner for Drama in 1979, is

Shepard's second play in his family Trilogy, which began with *Curse of the Starving Class* (1978) and ends with *True West* (1980). Theatrically speaking, the best thing to be said about *Buried Child* is that, although it was never produced on the Off Broadway Theater at that time, it did win a Pulitzer. *Buried Child* was first produced at the Magic Theater in San Francisco on June 27, 1978. Robert Woodruff, the director of that production, produced it again in its New York Premiere. The play was run for more than one hundred and fifty performances only in New York. Then it was produced at many different theaters worldwide.

As in *king Lear*, the theme of abusive family relationships is the major theme in *Buried Child*, where Shepard satirically criticizes the lack of family bonds, and the lack of harmony within the contemporary American family. Supporting this idea in his book, *Sam Shepard: The Life, The Loves Behind the Legend of a True American Original*, Don Shewey concurs that *Buried Child* deals with both "violence and the mystery of the family bond" (127).

Buried Child depicts the story of an unproductive and dislocated American family aiming at solving its problems. In his book titled, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Gerald M. Berkowitz says, "*Buried Child* offers a powerful dramatic metaphor for both the corruption of the American spirit and the hope for its salvation" (186). In this play Shepard depicts this American family as weak, miserable and full of ethical corruption and perversity. On top of all is Halie's incest with her son, Tilden. The baby boy who is drowned and buried at the hands of Dodge brings a curse to the whole family and makes every one within that household live in shame, misery and disappointment. The whole family is viciously victimized by Halie's rash selfishness and irresponsibility. Vince, hysterically afraid of future consequences, cannot maintain relations with his family members. Therefore, he leaves the family and lives with his girlfriend, Shelly, to be far away from the troubles and anxieties of his corrupt family. Berkowitz states that "This household is not America typified, but America personified" (186).

Owing to their selfishness, and as one of the aspects of family abuse, the characters in *Buried Child*, like those in *king Lear*, turn against one another. Abuse has become their principal, if not their only weapon, to live together, where everyone cares only for his own personal plight. These characters might be physically alive in blood and flesh, but they are spiritually dead and entombed like the buried child itself. According to Ron Mottram in his book titled, *Inner Landscapes: The Theatre of Sam Shepard*, the title of *Buried Child* "signifies a set of familial attitudes and

relationships [more] than it does on an individual or a particular event from the past" (140).

As Shakespeare does in his *King Lear*, Shepard clarifies in *Buried Child* that abusive relationships are common in intimate relationships where fathers and sons exchange insults and other aspects of abuse. Family abuse in *Buried Child* appears on different levels. The father/son or Dodge/Tilden/Vince tensions, the wife/husband or Halie/Dodge abusive relationship as well as the grand-mother-in-law and grand-father-in-law/fiancée of their grandson or Dodge and Halie/Shelly tough relationships and the miserable couple (Vince/Shelly). The mother/son violence between Halie and her buried baby, and the father/son violence between Tilden and Vince and the adulterous baby. As a social critic, Shepard satirically depicts these abusive relationships to attract the attention of American citizens to the impact of such abusive relationships on the future generations.

Unlike the beginning of *King Lear* which starts with the abusive father/daughter relationship, where Lear disinherits his faithful Cordelia and divide his kingdom between his vulgar Goneril and Regan, abusive relationships in *Buried Child* start with the wife/husband relationship between Halie and Dodge. The play begins with Dodge sitting alone watching the blank screen of the television detached from his wife, Halie, as if they are strangers. In fact, they are separated, not only psychologically but also physically and sexually alienated. Dodge himself declares this fact at the end of the play when he tells Shelly that he has not shared the bed with his wife, Halie, for about six years. The first scene in Act One, where Dodge is on stage and his wife is off stage, symbolically shows how they are isolated, separated and alienated from each other. According to Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta in their book titled, *American Playwrights: A Critical Survey*, Shepard's image of "the family depicted represents a private, closed, highly individualistic universe that exists beyond the conventions of society" (108).

The grandfather/grandson mutual abusive relationships occur in different situations in *Buried Child*. Vince gets depressed because his grandfather, Dodge, ignores him and pretends he does not know him. Instead, he blames Vince for deserting him and leaving him alone during many years of absence. Dodge stares at Vince saying,

Did you bring the whiskey?
You didn't do what you told me. You didn't
stay here with me

You left. You went outside like me told you not
to do
See what happens when you leave me alone?
See that? That's what happens. (87)

Here Dodge blames Vince for leaving him alone and helpless. Dodge's melancholic tone happens owing to Vince's absence for six years, which left him alone in that house of misfits. Shelly, feeling uncomfortable and afraid of Dodge, asks Vince to leave this nasty house of strangers and spend the night in a "motel." Talking about Dodge's impolite confrontation with her and Vince, she says, "Vince, this is really making me nervous. I mean he doesn't even want us here. He doesn't even like us" (SSSP, 89). Terry Miller declares that this

Proves to be a bizarre group of strangers who barely know who [Vince] . . . is. In trying to make sense of the situation, Shelly uncovers the secret of incest and infanticide – the murdered child is unearthed – which have destroyed these people. Startled by these unexpected realities, she flees, leaving Vince behind. (Qtd in *Encyclopedia of World Drama*, 456)

As in *King Lear*, domestic abuse has its verbal aspects in *Buried Child*. Yet verbal abuse in *king Lear* is very much lighter than in *Buried Child*. Dodge insults Shelly by calling her a "smart ass" and her home city, Los Angeles, a "stupid country". These words, aimed at Shelly, ultimately insult his grandson, Vince. Dodge's lack of responsibility to Vince reflects Shepard's own agony and his sense of frustration and disappointment because of his own father's irresponsible and rash behaviors. It is very inhuman for Dodge to tell Vince, "Stop calling me Grandpa will ya"! It's sickening. 'Grandpa.' I'm nobody's Grandpa" (90). In a very romantic meeting with Shelly, Tilden unconsciously and spontaneously tells her about the whole story of the "buried child," the product of incest with his mother, Halie. He tells Shelly that Dodge drowned the baby and buried it. He also tells her that Dodge is the only person who knows where that baby is buried. Talking to Shelly, Tilden says,

We had a baby. (Motioning to Dodge) He did.
Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put
it in the other. Little boy. Dodge killed it
Dodge drowned it

Never told Halie. Never told anybody. Just
drowned it
He's the only one who knows where it's buried.
(103-04)

Then when Vince reminds Tilden that he is his son, the latter mercilessly says, "I had a son once but we buried him" (92). Similarly, when Shelly meets the one-legged Bradley, the man with the wooden leg who is Tilden's brother and Vince's uncle, she asks him to help his father. She becomes upset and disappointed when he tells her that the best way to help Dodge is to get rid of him because he drowned the baby. The following dialogue between Shelly and Bradley is illuminating:

Shelly: Can't we do something for him?
Bradley: (Looking at Dodge) We should shoot him! (Laugh) We could drown him! What about drowning him?
Shelly: Shut up!
Bradley: Hey! Missus Don't talk to me in that tone a' voice.
. . . (Motioning to Dodge) Him, for one! Him and that half brain that just ran outa' here. . . .
Isn't that funny? (106)

The grandmother/grandson abusive relationships occur when Halie intimidates, terrifies and insults Dodge, and once she kicks him saying, "I told you not to let Tilden out of your sight! Where's he gone" (119)? We witness Shelly's insults and humiliations at the hands of almost all members in Dodge's family, including Vince himself. Dodge insults her and her home city, Los Angeles, in a cynical way and behaves like a rash teenager, although he is a grandfather. Bradley also attacks Shelly by putting his hand into her mouth. Like his father, he insults her by calling her a "prostitute." Again, we see Bradley's insult to Shelly later when he says in response to Shelley's question about what was going on in Dodge's family:

Shelly: (To Halie) I don't like being ignored
. . . I didn't like it when I was a kid and I still don't like it.
Bradley: We don't have to tell you anything, girl You're not the police are you? You're not the government. You're just some prostitute
. . . .

Shelly: (To Bradley) You stuck your hand in my mouth and you call me a prostitute. (120)

Hereditary aspects, which are not apparent in *King Lear*, are significant in *Buried Child*. Dodge's sons have inherited their father's abusive nature. Tilden, for example, ignores Vince and refuses to admit that he is his own son, saying that he once had a son and that he buried him. Vince also seems to inherit domestic abuse from his grandfather. When Shelly asks Vince to leave Dodge's house after being insulted and scared by him, Vince grabs her and refuses to do so. They start struggling over that situation all the while insulting each other:

Shelly: Let go of me.

Vince: You're not going anywhere! You're going to stay right here!

Shelly: Let go of me sonuvabich! I'm not your property. (91)

Like Lear and Gloucester in *King Lear*, Dodge feels restless and insecure, and also insane, but he might have learned the lesson in the sense that he begins to realize his plight when he says, "Persistence. Persistence, fortitude and determination. Those are the three virtues. You stick with those three and you can't go wrong" (98). Here Dodge becomes more experienced after his sin of killing and burying the innocent child. He realizes his fault and, now wiser, is convinced that patience, strength and wise decisions are the main virtues to which one should adhere in order to avoid committing crimes or sins in life. Dodge designates Vince to be the heir to the whole farm and house after his death.

As Shakespeare explains in *king Lear* in the abusive relationship between Goneril and her husband whom she calls a coward and other obscene words, the idea that women batter men appears in *Buried Child* in different situations. Dodge tells Shelly about Halie's incest and how she is inhuman in betraying him and giving him hard time. Consequently, he describes Halie as a "bitch" that eats her "puppies." Speaking to Shelly, Dodge says, "You never see a bitch eat her puppies" (112)? When Halie returns home with father Dewis, Dodge seems to be afraid of her when he asks Shelly to hide him from her. Turning to Shelly, Dodge whispers "Don't leave me alone now! Promise me? Don't go off and leave me alone. I need somebody here with me Don't leave me! Promise" (113)!

In addition to the horrible incestuous act, there are other acts of immorality in *Buried Child*. Halie flirts with Father Dewis, the sixty-year-old priest of the area, committing an abusive act against her helpless husband and sons. The following dialogue explains this immoral situation and Dewis' reaction to it:

Halie: . . . That's absolutely terrible. Aren't you afraid of being punished? . . .

Dewis: Not by the Italians. They're too busy punishing each other . . .

Halie: What about God?

Dewis: Well (playfully) God only hears what he wants to In our heart of hearts we know we're every bit as wicked as the Catholics.

(114)

Then Dodge insists on telling Shelly that Halie got "pregnant" though both of them had not shared the same bed for "six years." Speaking to Shelly, Dodge confesses all the hidden secrets of his family. Bradley threatens and terrifies him in order to stop talking, but in vain. Speaking to Shelly, Dodge says,

Halie had this. This baby boy. She had it It lived. It wanted to live in this family It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it All our boys knew. Tilden knew

I killed it. I drowned it. (124)

Like those in *king Lear*, except for Vince, the members of the family in *Buried Child* are depicted as self-victimizers who alone are responsible for their suffering, agony and plight. Thus, the audience hardly sympathizes with them because of their guilt and culpability. These characters, lying and disguising in order to hide their evil secret desires, attempt to escape the past with all its evil. They do so because they are afraid that their sins will be discovered. They pretend to lose the connection to their past action and deeds. According to Gerald Berkowitz, "This family is what Norman Rockwell's America has become; it is the direct result of a loss to connection to the past and a refusal to acknowledge its own past failings. The family exists on denial" (187).

As in *King Lear*, it is a rule in Shepard's play that parents' faults bring agony to their sons. In *Buried Child* sons are depicted as battered by their

parents. It is clear that the main focus of this play is on the torture that wives inflict on their husbands and children, as in the case of Halie who brings a curse and suffering to her husband and sons because of her selfishness and rashness. Her adultery with her son reflects her ingratitude, disloyalty and insincerity to her husband. In other words, Halie commits a psychologically devastating act against her husband. She is so wicked that she becomes dishonest not only with her helpless seventy-year-old husband but also with God and the teachings of her religion. Dodge at the very end of the play learns the lesson and obtains some kind of self-realization, self-recognition and repentance, which enables him to confess to Shelly everything concerning their scandalous secret. Thus, irresponsible seniors in Dodge's family give neither attention nor care to their juniors. To Dodge, his wife and sons, excluding Vince, the family is regarded as a commodity, a cheap one. Supporting this idea, Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta comment:

Buried Child integrates two conflicting views of American family: one mocks its degeneration while the other signals its rebirth. The young son is the pivotal figure, the spiritual savior. The idea of the family as a community remains a positive force in [this play] . . . despite the fact that singly the family members are caricatures of humanity. (109)

Opposite to *King Lear*'s mercilessly tragic ending, in *Buried Child* Shepard draws an optimistic ending in order to leave the door open for social reformers and politicians, as well as family seniors, to find more appropriate solutions for the dilemma of the contemporary American family. Supporting this idea, Marranca and Dasgupta write:

A solid protestant ethic informs his domestic dramas whose heroes – the sons – exhibit moral courage, assume responsibility, and embody virtues that make them worthy of the land Whether it has to do with people or roots or land, it remains one of Shepard's major dramatic themes: a belief in a certain spiritual order that rules the earth. (109)

Commenting on this optimistic ending of the play in his book titled *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, and the Off Broadway Theater*, Doris Auerbach states that *Buried Child* reveals the sense of "hope for a revitalized

America, for one that nourishes its children and holds the promise of the American dream once more.” (61)

Like *king Lear*, *Buried Child* depicts the story of an unproductive and dislocated American family aiming at solving its problems. In his book titled, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Gerald M. Berkowitz says, “*Buried Child* offers a powerful dramatic metaphor for both the corruption of the American spirit and the hope for its salvation” (186). In this play Shepard depicts this American family as weak, miserable and full of ethical corruption and perversity. On top of all is Halie’s incest with her son, Tilden. The baby boy who is drowned and buried at the hands of Dodge brings a curse to the whole family and makes every one within that household live in shame, misery and disappointment. The whole family is viciously victimized by Halie’s rash selfishness and irresponsibility. Vince, hysterically afraid of future consequences, cannot maintain relations with his family members. Therefore, he leaves the family and lives with his girlfriend, Shelly, to be far away from the troubles and anxieties of his corrupt family. In his book titled, *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Berkowitz states that “This household is not America typified, but America personified” (186).

As a devastating aspect of domestic abuse which he explores in *Buried Child*, Shepard reflects the absence of the role of fathers in contemporary America and its consequences. Tilden’s authoritative role as a son in this play reflects this fact. Consequently, the American family has become leaderless and apt to deteriorate due to violence among sons. The lack of the dominant father in this play creates many clashes among the whole members of the family. Dodge’s family lacks unity, harmony and homogeneity due to the absence of a dominant father. The most defining trait of this family is, in fact, its incessant domestic violence. Only at the end of the play do we get the sense that Vince may restore dominance and control of this family after inheriting the house upon his grandfather’s death. Commenting on this dangerous phenomenon in his book titled *Modern American Drama: 1945-1990*, C. W. E. Bigsby claims that *Buried Child* narrates the story of Shepard’s family:

Father reappears in various guises – an alcoholic who deserted the family, a man in love with space, a bewildered guide to a son who fears above all that he will metamorphose, become the man he feared as well as loved, become as constant in his inconsistency as the person he despaired of loving until he wandered

to his death one day. His grandfather . . . on a farm that 'looks abandoned' appears in *Buried Child*. (167)

Unlike *king Lear*, which dramatizes the abusive conditions of the family of Lear, the King of Britain, *Buried Child* is an autobiographical family play that has been written in the late 1970s. In fact, there is a resemblance between Vince, the protagonist of the play, and Sam Shepard the dramatist. Both are musicians, both are neglected and ignored by their fathers, both are sensitive, and both are hard workers and adventurers. While we see Vince coming to visit his family after a long time of separation, we know from Shepard's biography that he did the same as Vince. Shepard went to see his father and grandfather in the desert. Both Vince and Shepard demonstrate a deep sense of gratitude to their families and possess genuine belief in family bonds that can bring harmony and warmth to the family and, consequently, to the whole society. Both Vince and Shepard seek self-recognition and self-realization in that they strive to regain the bonds of their disunited and dislocated families. Shepard tries to represent the specific in order to reflect the general. Shepard's family, like that of Vince's, imitates the same dilemma of many American families that suffer from lack of interest and communication. Shepard's message here seems to be that the bonds within contemporary American family are deteriorating and even vanishing due to the soaring rates of domestic violence. The self-challenge scene of Vince while driving his car reflects this fact. In his very long speech with Shelly, Vince says,

I drove all night I could see myself in the windshield I studied my face As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield His face became his father's face And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing (130)

Here the unconscious becomes conscious out of suffering and stress. This mythical picture, introduced by Shepard in this play as one of his dramatic devices, shows how Vince fails to escape the past violent history of his family as represented in the person of his grandfather. This picture, intensely autobiographical in tone and purpose, imitates the same scenario that actually happened to Shepard while driving with his

grandfather to visit his family in the desert. While driving, Vince, like Shepard, spontaneously recalls the picture of his parents and his grandparents as being similar in committing the same kind of sin. Commenting on Vince's situation in his book titled *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, Gerald Berkowitz states:

Through courage, honor or madness . . . Vince accepts his connection to the past and returns, declaring himself the new owner of the farm Vince appears to sacrifice his youth and even his sanity, sinking into his grandfather's immobility, while the baby will bring the shame and scandal it was killed to avoid On the metaphoric level Shepard repeats the assertion that is a Leitmotif of his career: that the future of America lies in the reintegration with the best, and an acknowledgement of the worst, in its past. (Qtd in *American Drama of the Twentieth Century*, 188)

Hard-hearted, irresponsible and inhuman, parents in both plays bring a curse to their sons who will involuntarily and inevitably inherit it from their parents and extend it to future generations of the family. Like Shepard's father, Dodge is a completely irresponsible parent to his sons. Realistically speaking, Dodge tortures his sons, the thing which animals do not do against their young. Though Bradley is an "amputee" and physically handicapped, Dodge mercilessly expresses his denial and rejection of him. He ignores him as if he is not his own flesh and blood. Dodge denies Bradley his familial rights and privileges. Tilden is also very inhuman by ignoring his existence and by mercilessly telling him that he has no sons at all except that "buried child." Dodge completely ignores Vince as does Tilden. When Vince returns home after six years of absence away from his family, everyone, including Dodge himself, refuses to welcome him or show any human warmth that means he belongs to this family. Instead, they all reject him as if he is a mere stranger. Dodge's denial of his responsibility towards his sons appears in other different situations. When Tilden, Vince's father, asks Dodge for financial and psychological support, for example, he says,

You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age There's nothing we can do for you now any way Support

yourself. What d'ya come back here for? You expect us to feed you forever? (78)

Dodge's cruelty in drowning and burying the child echoes Shepard's own agony caused by the irresponsibility of his father towards him and his mother. In fact, Shepard depicts Dodge as acting in the same way Shepard's grandfather acted in his life. In her article titled "True Stories: Reading the Autobiographic in *Cowboy Mouth*, *True Dylan*, and *Buried Child*," Ann Wilson summarizes Shepard's comments about his visit to his grandparents who were then living in the desert near Chicago:

My grandfather sits as he's always sat – in a hole of his sofa wrapped in crocheted blankets facing the T.V. He is like a skeleton now He smokes and drinks continuously Sometimes he coughs so violently that his whole body doubles over and he can't catch his breath for a long time Everything he needs is within a three-foot reach. The T.V. is only on for the baseball. When the game ends my grandmother comes in and turns it off. (Qtd in *Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard*, 109)

Similar to Shakespeare's tone in *King Lear*, throughout his play Shepard is highly realistic in tone. First, he chooses a very conventional structure for the play. Then he explains how the sins of parents or those of grandparents are blindly and unavoidably inherited by their sons. *Buried Child* portrays the story of a very miserable Midwestern American family whose members suffer from psychological disorders resulting from their sinful deeds. Dodge drinks whiskey heavily in order to forget his sin of killing and burying the illegal child. Halie, Dodge's dishonest and insincere wife, gives birth to a child from incest with her son Tilden who, in return, is always trying to forget the past and his awful act of incest with his mother. Everyone within this household has a specific defect of his/her own. Even the one-legged crippled Bradley shares with his mother and father the shameful secret of the "buried child." In this way the whole family is psychologically and mentally disturbed because of their destructive secret – a total failure. Feeling discarded and unrecognizable by his family except for Halie, with whom he has committed incest with and gave birth to the child, Tilden becomes so furious that he begins to smash bottles and many things at home in order to intimidate everybody, including Dodge, his father. David Engel, in *Dictionary of Literary*

Biography: Twentieth-Century American Dramatists, points out that *Buried Child* shows

How generations wound and alienate each other Shepard's ability to write about the fantasies and myths, which shape American consciousness, is unique in current theater He continually searches for new methods of expression. These qualities place him in the forefront of contemporary American playwrights. (238)

To sum up, it is worthwhile to mention that this is a thematic cross-cultural study of the abusive domestic relationships in both British and American societies as reflected in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Shepard's *Buried Child*. Although *King Lear* and *Buried Child* are written in two distant periods of time by two dramatists who belong to two different countries that have different cultures, values, customs and traditions, they share similar thematic elements. The two plays deal with the same theme of abusive family relationships. These two plays share the same nature of violence as emotional, materialistic and physical, where we see greedy, insane, blinded and dead people. Yet, *Buried Child* is different from *King Lear* since it deals with the theme of infidelity and sexual violence, a treatment which represents the American society as much more immoral than the British society. Both *King Lear* and *Buried Child* depict the ingratitude and mercilessness of sons against their parents as well as irresponsible parents. But the character of the immoral Halie is definitely the worst of all in the two plays for committing such horrible acts as flirting with the priest, Father Dewis, as well as giving birth to a baby, the result of her incestuous act. She also kills it mercilessly. Even mythical and Political elements are elaborated by the two playwrights in these two plays. Both dramatists attract our attention to the mythical theory of the Green Man and the Corn King: In *King Lear*, Shakespeare makes use of the Pagan myth of the Green Man as well as the belief in the eclipses of the sun, but in *Buried Child* Shepard recalls the myth of the Corn King. While Shakespeare discusses political corruption at the time of King Lear of Britain in a directly historical way, Shepard symbolically and indirectly comments on corruption of politics in contemporary America.

Technically speaking, these two plays are different: While *King Lear* is a tragedy in the traditionally old sense of the sixteenth century, since it

consists of five acts, and each act is divided into a number of scenes, *Buried Child* is a tragedy in the modern sense, which consists of three acts only. Unlike the tragic figures in *King Lear*, who are persons of high and prestigious position (i.e., a King, a Princess, an Earl and Kent), the tragic figures in *Buried Child* are only ordinary people. In his book titled An Introduction to Shakespeare: The Dramatist in his Context, Peter Hyland comments on the nature of Shakespeare's tragic figures thus:

Tragedy is about personal and social anxiety. The simplest way to describe a tragic dramatic structure would be to say that it concerns a central figure who falls from a position of power or status into adversity that leads to death, and this would certainly apply to Shakespeare. (p.183)

Also the endings of the two plays are completely different. Whereas *King Lear*, like other Shakespearean tragedies, ends in a horrible and bloody scene where Lear carries the dead body of his miserable youngest daughter, Cordelia, *Buried Child* has an optimistic ending as some sort of artificial reconciliation, Shepard intends, in order to relieve the psyche of theatergoers and readers and help the sinful to repent. Finally, I do recommend that, because of the importance of this topic as a global phenomenon, further comparative studies about this controversial domestic theme should be handled in future papers.

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1. This book is always referred to as SSSP throughout the study.

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Abstract

Abusive Family Relationships in Shakespeare's King Lear and Shepard's Buried Child

The core of this study is to investigate the aspects of domestic violence, which became a global phenomenon, as reflected in Shakespeare's King Lear and Shepard's Buried Child. This thesis is a commentary on such family issues as the irresponsibility and injustice of Lear against his good daughter, Cordelia, as well as the vulgarity of his two ungrateful daughters, Goneril and Regan, against him as Shakespeare depicts in his King Lear. Then, it discusses such domestic tensions raised by Shepard in his Buried Child as the irresponsibility of a father (Dodge), ungrateful sons (Tilden and Bradley) and a hard-heartedly incestuous mother (Halie). In conclusion, this study tries to find out the similarities and dissimilarities between these two famous family plays in dealing with the theme of domestic violence (though written by two different playwrights, who belong to two different ethnicities and two distant eras). It also highlights the greatness of both Shakespeare and Shepard who could attract the attention of their countries and the whole world to domestic abuse as the most fatal family problem that threatens the stability and the future of mankind.

ملخص

التعسف في العلاقات الأسرية في مسرحية الملك لير لشكسبير والطفل المدفون لشيبيرد

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إبراز أهم مظاهر العنف الأسري في رانعة وليم شكسبير " الملك لير " ومسرحية الطفل المدفون لسام شيبيرد الكاتب المسرحي الأمريكي المعاصر ويتناول هذا البحث بالنقد والتحليل أوجه الشبه والاختلاف بين كلتا المسرحيتين من حيث الموضوع والزمن وظروف كل من المجتمعين الإنجليزي والأمريكي وبالرغم من اختلاف الزمان والمكان نجد أن كلا الكاتبين تناولا موضوعا مشتركا هو " العنف داخل الأسرة " وعرجوا على بعض مظاهر متماثلة في ظلم الآباء لأبنانهم وقسوة الآباء على الأبناء وما يترتب على ذلك من آثار نفسية .

وتعطي هذه الدراسة أمثلة متعددة للتعسف بين أفراد الأسرة مثل قسوة الملك لير على ابنته " كورديليا " وحرمانه لها من حقها في ممتلكاته وطردها من مملكته لمجرد أنها كانت صريحة ومخلصة في ردها عليه ولأنها رفضت أن تتأقفه في مشاعرها تجاهه ثم يصور لنا شكسبير كيف أن " لير " قد تعرض للإهانة والعنف من قبل ابنتيه المنافقتين (جونيريل و ريجال) اللتان خدعاه بمكرهما وبكلامهما المعسول حيث قاما بتوزيع ممتلكاته كلها عليهما فقط وحرما " كورديليا " منها وفي النهاية نراه يعاني أشد المعاناة من سوء معاملة ابنتيه له ويظهر في نهاية المسرحية فاقد العقل يبحث عن "كورديليا " ليعتذر لها لما بدر منه تجاهها إلا انه يجدها قد ماتت ليموت بالحسرة والندم .

كما يعرض البحث لمشكلة أسرة " دودج " الأب والجد المسكين الذي يتجاهل مسؤوليته تجاه ابنائه

(تيلدن وبادلي) وحفيده (فينيس) كما يصور زوجته (هالي) كام مستهتره ومجردة من المشاعر الإنسانية والأخلاقية فهي الأم التي تمارس الرزيلة مع ابنها (تليدن) وتحمل سفاحا وتلد طفلا وتقتله بمساعدة زوجها عديم الرحمة ثم تبين هذه الدراسة كيف أنقلب أعضاء تلك الأسرة على بعضهم البعض باللوم تارة وبالتهديد تارة وبالسب والقذف واللعن والأذى البدني تارة أخرى مما أدى إلى التفتك والانحلال داخل الأسرة بأكملها .

ويخلص هذا البحث في النهاية إلى طبيعة العنف الأسري كما صوره " شيبيرد " في " الطفل المدفون " يبدو أكثر حدة ودموية من المجتمع الإنجليزي كما أبرزها شكسبير في " الملك لير " وبذلك لأن مظاهر العنف داخل الأسرة الأمريكية تחדش الحياة وتلوث الفطرة كما تلفت هذه