

Domestic Turmoil and Cultural Disintegration in Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*.

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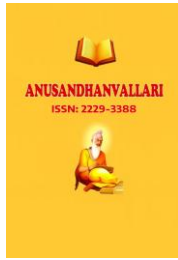
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Abstract: Sam Shepard's family plays portray the disintegration of the American household, where love, unity, and communication collapse under emotional strain. His plays unveil the failure of the American Dream, portraying middle-class families burdened by economic hardship, moral decay, and disillusionment. His *A Lie of the Mind* pictures domestic turmoil and cultural disintegration, one of the major causes obstructing the American Dream. The study examines the causes and consequences of alcoholism and domestic violence, ultimately leading to cultural anarchy. Wife battering, marginalization, suppression, and degrading women mark the cultural disintegration in American society. Shepard has transformed familiar domestic spaces into arenas of conflict, where inherited guilt and broken ideals suffocate human connection. Shepard advises to treat women on par with men and also advocates the empowerment of women to rebuild the nation. The play is a cautionary tale to the Americans, advising them to transform challenges into opportunities, through resilience and determination.

Key words : American Dream, middle-class families, domestic turmoil, cultural disintegration, moral decay, alcoholism, wife battering, resilience, and determination.

Sam Shepard, one of America's most celebrated playwrights, carved a distinctive place in modern drama by blending realism with symbolism and by exposing the contradictions of American culture. His family plays often examine fractured families, alienated individuals, and the elusive American Dream, making him both a chronicler and critic of contemporary America. *A Lie of the Mind* is one Shepard's most powerful explorations of family disintegration and cultural fragmentation. Amani in "Fantastic Narrative Spaces in Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*" declares, "A Lie of the Mind is one of Sam Shepard's most complex family plays" (124). The play presents two families scarred by domestic violence, disconnection, and suppressed emotions, using domestic sphere as a stage to reflect cultural anxieties. Kaityln Short in her article "Domestic Violence Against Women in the United States" proclaims, "Domestic violence is a form of abuse by one individual against another in an intimate relationship. Historically, women have suffered the greatest effects of domestic violence, with almost a quarter of US women experiencing domestic violence in their lifetime" (Short). Domestic turmoil, in the form of alcoholism, mistrust, estrangement, and miscommunication reveals the ways the American families become a site of affliction rather than a refuge. At the same time, Shepard depicts the erosion of cultural values, the disintegration of traditions, and the failure of the American Dream, exposing a society adrift in materialism, selfishness, jealousy, pop culture, and patriarchal dominance.

Shepard's male characters are frequently portrayed as violent, aggressive, and deeply unsettled, embodying the turbulence of modern American masculinity. Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Bradley in

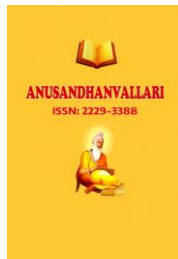


Buried Child, Lee in *True West*, and Jake and Mike in *A Lie of the Mind*, are aggressive in their actions and utterances. Shepard candidly admits the cruelty, suppression, marginalization, and physical assault faced by American women within their family. Bigsby in *Modern American Drama 1945 – 2000*, comments, “In Shepard’s works men are violent, striking out at one another, at the women they love and at inanimate objects” (170). In *A Lie of the Mind*, Beth is a victim of wife battering, which Shepard considers a social evil affecting the success of the American Dream. Suspicion, jealousy, and low self-esteem fuels hostility and anger in Jake against his wife Beth, which leads to physical violence. Jake brutally assaults Beth causing severe brain damage. Jake admits, “She’s not gonna’ pull outa’ this one, Frankie. She’s not gonna. I saw her face. It was bad this time. Real bad All red and black and blue” (*A Lie of the Mind* 10). Fuelled by jealousy and possessiveness, Jake physically attacks Beth. Shepard ridicules the male-chauvinistic American society and exposes the deep-rooted domestic violence that victimizes women within the family sphere. He uses this violence not merely as a personal tragedy but as a reflection of the broader cultural decay where patriarchal dominance erodes compassion, communication, and moral balance. Shepard hereby acknowledges the prevalence of domestic violence in modern American society.

Shepard vividly depicts domestic violence and highlights the critical importance of ensuring women’s safety in both their homes and society. He portrays home as site of danger and violence. Shepard urges Americans to take responsibility for ensuring the safety and protection of women. Shepard advises the Americans to treat women on par with men. Ensuring that women are treated on par with men is fundamental to achieving gender equality and fostering inclusive development. Through the narrative, it is evidence that Shepard is totally against gender-based violence and discrimination. The play is a plea to the American government to strengthen gender equality laws and ensure their effective implementation. Shepard ridicules the inadequacies of American law and order by highlighting the absence of institutional intervention in case of domestic violence in the contemporary society.

In Shepard’s family plays, the absent or failed father is a recurring figure whose shadow destabilizes the family unit. Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Dodge in *Buried Child*, the Old Man in *Fool for Love*, and Jake’s *A Lie of the Mind* are either dead, or absent, or failed ones. In *A Lie of the Mind*, the father had died young, leaving the family to suffer. Lorraine, mother of Jake and Sally, frequently recalls her husband’s addiction to alcohol and his death as the major causes of all problems in the family. She remonstrates, “Is there any good reason in this Christless world why men leave women? Is there? Is there any good reason for that? You tell me. You tell me. Isn’t there enough to suffer already? We got all kinda’ good reasons to suffer without men Cookin’ up more” (*A Lie of the Mind* 64). It is understandable that the father is an alcoholic and ill-tempered person. Shepard ridicules men who prioritize self-destructive habits for temporary pleasures, thereby ruining the prospects of their families. Shepard is worried that the younger generation has inherited the negative aspects of the older generation. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Jake, shaped by the memory of paternal dominance, unconsciously inherit his father’s aggression, repeating the same patterns of violence and emotional detachment. Shepard thus portrays the father’s death not as liberation, but as a haunting reminder of legacy that corrupts love, communication, and stability within the American household.

Shepard mocks the lawlessness embedded in American society, portraying a world where legal and moral boundaries are routinely ignored. In *A Lie of the Mind*, this critique is vividly illustrated through Baylor, a character who boasts about having attacked lawyers, openly flaunting his contempt for the legal system. Baylor boasts, “Last lawyer who tried to comeback in here, we cut his nuts off” (*A Lie of the Mind* 80). Baylor’s behaviour underscores Shepard’s depiction of a culture in which personal power and aggression take precedence over societal rules, and where the law is ineffective in restraining violence. This disregard for legal norms contributes directly to the chaos and suffering within the family, reflecting a broader pattern of social and moral decay. By emphasizing



characters like Baylor, Shepard exposes the dangerous consequences of lawlessness, revealing that it not only threatens public order but also corrodes familial stability and trust.

Gormez in “Man, Woman, Violence and Sam Shepard” opines, “*A Lie of the Mind* is Shepard’s other plays in which he handles gender conflict (133). Shepard foregrounds the tension between male and female roles within a patriarchal family structure. The play dramatizes the clash of expectations, power, and authority, particularly through the abusive relationship between Jake and Beth. Jake’s aggression and sense of entitlement reflect traditional notions of male dominance, while Beth’s struggle for autonomy and dignity embodies resistance to this control. Shepard also explores the ripple effects of such conflict on other family members, including Lorraine and Frankie, exposing that rigid gender hierarchies perpetuate emotional trauma, violence, and alienation. By exposing these gendered tensions, the play critiques the systemic inequalities and destructive dynamics that shape familial and societal interactions.

Shepard’s family plays frequently delve into fragmented relationships. Scanlan asserts, “The world of American family drama shows a concern for family failure and destruction. The power of our play comes from the intensity of this concern” (7). In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard presents poor parenting as a cause for family disintegration as the children are misguided and over protected. Lorraine consistently defends the mistakes and unruly attitude of Jake. She over protects him and does not take responsibility for his violent actions. She defends, “So what’s new? Name a day he wasn’t in trouble. He was trouble from day one. Fell on his damn head the second he was born. Slipped right through the doctor’s fingers. That’s where it all started. Back there. Had nothin’ to do with his upbringing” (*A Lie of the Mind* 21). Lorraine’s excessive protectiveness and biased attitude prevent Jake from generating essential good qualities to transform into a successful and good-natured person. Shepard affirms that cruelty stems from misguided love and over protection.

Shepard strongly believes that avariciousness to earn quick money, disregarding the family welfare, is a negative trait among the modern Americans. In *Curse of the Starving Class*, Weston becomes a failed father and husband due to his misguided investment in real estate. In *True West*, both Austin and Lee attempt to earn money through Hollywood, ruining their relationship and family peace. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Baylor, father of Beth is materialistic and unsympathetic. He focuses on earning money and hunting deer, even when Beth experiences severe physical and mental trauma.

BAYLOR. Well, wake her up. We drove all the way down here from Billings just to see her. Now wake her up.

MIKE. I wish you’d have called me or something before you came down.

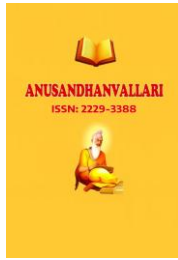
BAYLOR. Why should I call you?

MIKE. She’s having a kind of rough time right now, Dad. She needs a lot of rest.

BAYLOR. Listen, I got two mules settin’ out there in the parkin’ lot I gotta’ deliver by midnight. I’m supposed to be at the sale by six tomorrow mornin’ and those mules have to be in the stalls by midnight tonight.

MIKE. You brought mules down here?

BAYLOR. Yeah. Why not? Might as well do a little business long as I’m gonna’ be down in this country anyway. That all right



by you? (*A Lie of the Mind* 26)

Baylor's decision to prioritise selling mules while Beth is seriously admitted in hospital reveals his misplaced values. He is not worried about the medical condition of Beth unlike his son Mike. He embodies rugged individualism, a defining characteristic of traditional American masculinity. In their essay "Rugged Individualism: Dead or Alive", David Davenport and Gordon Lloyd opine, "Reaching back to founding, rugged individualism has defined American character and uniqueness. It has been described as the "master assumption" of American political and economic thought. The combination of individual liberty in America's founding and the frontier spirit provided the rich soil in which it has grown and developed" (Davenport). The authors argue that rugged individualism is the identity of America and it has created rich environment in which American society could grow and develop. In *A Lie of the Mind*, Shepard portrays Baylor as a father figure who focuses on living independently, without depending on others. This spirit has made him rigid and unsympathetic. Rugged individualism blinds Baylor to the reality that family needs cooperation, care and support. He prioritises land, property and money over any of his relationships. He also disrespects the legal representatives and the medical practitioners, who provide medical treatment to his daughter. Shepard advises the parents not to neglect their children, particularly at times of adversity.

Most of Shepard's men are alcoholic. Weston in *Curse of the Starving Class*, Dodge, Tilden, Bradley and Vince in *Buried Child*, Lee in *True West*, the Old Man and Eddie in *Fool for Love*, and Jake in *A Lie of the Mind* consume alcohol that leads to familial commotion and violence. Shepard admits that materialism, addiction to alcohol, unemployment, envy, affectation, pop culture, gender bias, domestic violence, and ignorance have ruined American culture and values, and have stood a barrier to the success and fulfilment of the American Dream.

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