

Politics and the Craft of War in Sam Shepard's *States of Shock*

Dr. Sanaa Lazim Hassan Department of
English Language and linguistics
College of Education Wassit University

Abstract:

Sam Shepard is one of the controversial modern American playwrights who wrote about issues that are concerned with the individual in America rather than the institution

In his theatre, the audience expects to see everything that concerns itself with the western culture and ignores that which is global. He is very much interested in the inner landscape of America rather than its position as the leader of the world. Thus, in his drama he preaches such ideology urging the US Administration to focus the attention on the American welfare.

The research attempts an analysis on his play *The States of Shock* using the New Historicism approach through studying the writer's point of view concerning the craft of war.

Modern politics has been very influential on both the social as well as the literary scene. Wars, whether launched or were only loomed at, has been considered the most controversial subject about which plays, poems, and books were written. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, writers

expressed their protest against political tyranny especially that events started to speed up towards a possible global word in the Middle East.

In August 1990, Iraqi troops invaded and occupied Kuwait. The American response was immediate and its movement towards ending this invasion was quick. By November, George Bush had won a resolution from the Security Council permitting the use of military force if Saddam Hussein did not withdraw. On January 17, 1991, planes from France, Italy, Britain, Saudi Arabia, and the United States started bombing Baghdad and other Iraqi cities, Operation Desert Storm had begun. After the war, sanctions were imposed on Iraq to weaken the regime and make Saddam Hussein approve the existence of Israel. The tension between Israel and its Arab neighbors, especially Iraq seemed to be tenses, thus, for America, the Middle East remained a volatile region (Davidson 1116).

American writers were especially involved in this war since America claimed the position of the global guardian. Sam Shepard is one of those writers who expressed his refusal of such policy on the basis of national safety. He called for political reformation believing that the Administration must pay more attention on local issues rather than international ones. The beauty of heroism and the ugliness of death are the two faces of the same coin in Shepard's *States of Shock*. Politicians are dressed very well in front of the camera while in fact they represent the ugly face of the nation since they create wars. Fields of war kill the beauty of life. Such facts create war human monsters that swing between beauty and ugliness; they long for the beauty of the past while standing in the middle of the dead corpses of their dear ones.

Samuel Shepard Rogers(1943-), a son of a proud army pilot, spend his childhood moving from one military base to the next. Around 1949, the family settled on an evocated ranch in rural Duarte, Southern California. Shepard there received his formal education. As a student, he acted in college productions amongst others of Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth*. During that time, Sam introduced his play *Mildew* which he derived from Tennessee Williams. This play was published in the campus literary magazine, *Mosaic*.

At nineteen, he joined the Bishop's Company Repertory Players as an actor and went on a cross-country tour. Along the road, he changed his name into Sam Shepard. In the Village Gate, Shepard met Ralph Cook who had just founded Theatre Genesis in St. Mark's church in the Bowery. Shepard introduced his original form of *Cowboys* (1964, revised in 1967), and *The Rock Garden* (1964) to Cook. Shepard's career as a professional playwright was mainly launched because of Michael Smith's review of his plays which was published in *The Village Voice*.

Shepard's early plays were mainly One-Act plays, many of which were not printed but earned him success. Among these plays were the post-absurdist *Upto Thursday*, *The Rocking Chair and Dog*, *Chicago* (1965), *Icarus's Mother* (1965), and his most successful play *Red Cross* (1966) which earned him his first Obie (or off-Broadway) Award for Distinguished Playwriting. Since then, Shepard started to expand his dramatic scope leading a successful career that gave him the Tony Award in 1996 for his play *The Buried Child* under the category of Best New Play.

Shepard's early plays reflected a direct self-expression while those he introduced in the late sixties and early seventies expressed deeper equivocal identities in American society.(Crank,35)

In 1991, Shepard introduced the controversial play *States of Shock* which came as a total surprise to the general audience. It is an outrageous reaction to the presentation of the military and media war of the 1990s against Iraq as a heroic battle. It also reacted against the public moral paralysis and its silence towards the governmental arrogance against a foreign nation. Shepard comments that he decided to “create a character of such outrageous, repulsive, military, fascist demonism that the audience would recognize it, and say ‘Oh, this is the essence of this thing.’” (Shepard, qtd. In Rosen, 1992: 39) Shepard's intention was to write the war more directly, which is a self-imposed challenge that he could reach in the play. This started a question about the possibility of writing a ‘war’ and representing the point of view of the dead about it. When the *States of Shock* opened in April right after the 1991 Persian Gulf, critics saw it as a direct angry response to the patriotic fever caused by Operation Desert Storm and its Comprehension Demolition of the Iraqi armed forces. The audience can see direct references and images taken from the Gulf war: the playwright uses a cyclorama at the back of the set to conjure the media coverage of the night strafing of Baghdad.

The play is set in a ‘family restaurant’, which brings to the mind of the audience ‘family values’ of the late 1980s-early 1990s. The playwright introduces two characters to reinforce the Reagan/Bush era conservatism,

The White Man and White Woman who are sitting in the restaurant complaining about the poor quality of costumer services and they ignore the eruptions of deafening drumming and the screened images of war fare. They represent the majority of the American nation who accepted the violence that was enacted on its behalf. In another corner of the restaurant, the playwright introduces two men sitting on a table; the Colonel and Stubbs. The first is an ex-Colonel in the American army and the latter is a soldier who has been severely injured in the Operation Desert Storm. The audience realizes that in this battle the son of the Colonel is killed by friendly fire.

In the play, the hostility is not over. The playwright reconstructs the fateful event that killed the Colonel's son and mutilated Stubbs one year after the event. It slowly merges the acting of the war that the Colonel presents on the table inside the restaurant with the war raging outside Danny's, the family restaurant. The scene obviously shows that the hostilities are never over especially for people like the Colonel. On the other hand, we have Glory Bee, who appeared beyond expiration like the Colonel, Stubbs, and the cadaverous White Couple. The play ends with the White Couple wearing gas masks which reveal that the war never ends. The playwright shocks his audience through the startling makeup of the dramatic personae and the shock therapy to which the Colonel subjects his son and the disparities of scale and dimension between the projected images (of tanks, infantry and heavy artillery), live performance and toys (soldiers, tanks, airplanes, and ships). To the Colonel, these toys possess

the surrealist's fetishistic fascination with cathartic objects and surrogates. The restaurant represents the embattled psychic stage for the reenactment and abreaction of the character's obsessive compulsions.

The play opens in the restaurant where Glory Bee(a waitress) is trying to serve lunch to the Colonel, and Stubbs who has just come from the hospital where Stubbs spend a time in there because he was shot in his chest. It happens to be that the Colonel picked up Stubbs today from the hospital and this day is the anniversary of the Colonel son's death. The Colonel is dressed in a mix-and-match assortment of costumes from America's military history (civil war sabre, World war II, pilot's hat, and so forth) thus, he depicts an immortal demonic uncle Sam figure. He is a representative of the ugly face of politics that feed on war to gain power and domination over nations local and foreign. Stubbs, on the other hand, depicts a maimed, wheelchair-bound war veteran whose character brings to the mind the pop culture memory of Vietnam. Johan Gallens argues that the he is a living reminder of the national folly who rails at the nation that has tried to ignore him (Gallens, 56).He brings back to mind the image of the disillusioned youth who came back home after the great war to an unknown future. Shepard uses Stubbs as a reminder of the national disaster that results from governmental failure. Stubbs often repeats that he was hit by "friendly fire", he says, "It smiled in my face. I could see its teeth when it hit us."(31)Stubbs suffering does not stem from the fact that his nation ignored him because of its discomfort with the memory of a foreign war. He is rather hurt by the fact that it was his nation that shot him down. The

audience can feel the sense of all-encompassing disillusionment and disaffection through his words when he speaks to the nation: “Your face, lying. Smiling and lying. Your bald face of denial. Peering down from a distance. Bombing me.”(43) His words represent Shepard’s opinion of how the politicians and merchants of war cry enthusiastically urging for a just war, while in fact drinking and celebrating the future benefits.

Through this play, Shepard successfully attacks the military arrogance. He even reaches beyond this goal through targeting the war scenario as a symptomatic of an American blindness that is poisoning its people. At a certain point in the play, Stubbs refers to the fact that the Colonel is his father and that he denies this relation partly because he is ashamed of Stubbs’s failure and mainly because Stubbs cannot explain this failure. For the Colonel, such a failure does not come along with his views about the way the world operates which must be upheld at all costs. The audience hears Stubbs screaming at the Colonel, as well as them, “DON’T LET YOURSELF SLIP INTO DOUBT! Lock onto an image or you’ll be blown to KINGDOM COME!”(38) He mocks the Colonel’s attempts to form a perspective of the reality. Shepard connects the national crisis, the loss of national stability and safety, with the personal identity crisis. It is obvious that he offers an intriguing variation on the theme of defining one’s own identity in dualistic opposition to some supposed ‘Other’.

The play reveals that the nation’s self-perception depends on having an opponent to demonize. The Colonel declares on stage “LONG LIVE THE ENEMY!...WITHOUT THE ENEMY WE’RE

NOTHING!”(15) Through the Colonel, Shepard declares that war provides a ‘focus’ for both the government and the nation and with the end of the Cold War, America needed a fresh, new area of prey to feed on. It finds its aim in the Middle East, particularly Iraq. It represents both, a political rival and focus point. Glory Bee declares that “I missed the Cold War with all my heart.”(41) She represents the happy nation who celebrates the absence of ‘an evil empire’ and the defining of America’s righteousness. This explains the role of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in the American nation’s psychodrama during the early 1990s; it was marketed in the media as the nest of the devil’s disciples. Iraq and its president were blamed for any terrorist act as supporters of terrorism. This picture was dominating the scene in America during the 1990s.

In 1992, Shepard states to *The village Voice* that he

Could not believe the systematic kind of insensitivity of it, there was this punitive attitude- we’re just going to knock these people off the face of earth....Not only that, but they’ve convinced the American public that this was a good deed, that this was in fact a heroic fucking war, and welcome the heroes back. What fucking heroes, man? I mean, they bombed the shit out of those people.(Roszak,35)

This outrage is expressed in the play through picturing the nation’s obsession with the idea of masculine heroism as a reaction to the inner sense of lost direction. The Colonel declares that “Even in the most horrible devastation,

we can't forget that we were generated from the bravest stock, The Pioneer. The Mountain Man. The Texas Ranger. The Lone Ranger.”(24) According to the Colonel, military power is America's manifest right because it is the logical extension of these frontier traditions. The play depicts the theme that war is just a mask to hide behind and save the nation from the terror of existential meaninglessness. Shepard has described the Colonel as a “character of outrageous, repulsive, military, fascist demonism,”(Rosen, 39) that he is beyond redemption.

America has participated in its own tragedy and his play expressed this through the Colonel and his 'son'. This is a moment where Shepard intended to warn the Bush Administration as well as the audience about the potential dangers of messing up in politics. To fail in leading your country towards safety and prosperity is the bottom line of political failure. For Shepard, the foreign politics of USA have cooperated to the tragedy of 11th of September as well as the following tragedies of the American nation.

He asks a very important question in this play. If the US troops has launched a war against terrorism- represented by President Saddam Hussein- that killed innocent civilians- represented by American civilians- and history proved all these allegations to be wrong, what does that make America? Is war based on false reasons justifies killing innocent Iraqi civilians? Which is more difficult, to launch a war and commit a grave political and military mistake, or to keep peace through admitting that you are wrong and leave the military option aside? For Shepard, cultural and political consciousness is very

important for any American citizen to consider so that the mistakes of the past will never be committed again.

In a way, the play reflects the influences of Sam's childhood memories. Being brought up in a military base made him aware of the reality of being in the army. He is disillusioned about the fact of war. He knows for sure what the price a family pays because of war and reasons that derive politicians to start one. Sam Shepard forms an attitude against war early in his life believing that the American nation must focus within; it should dedicate all its efforts towards developing the individual and support the progress of the American society and not to waste its youth in foreign lands. He believes that the American administration must stop its policy of aggression and stop playing the role of the universal soldier. It should focus its efforts on educating the new generation the philosophy of peace rather than that of war. This process will definitely grant America the future it aspires.

Bibliography

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Sam Shepard*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003. Print.

Bloom, Clive, ed. *American Drama*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. Print.

Bottoms, Stephen J. *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis*. England: Cambridge UP, 1992. Print.

Crank, James A. *Understanding Sam Shepard*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012. Print.

Davidson, James West, ed. *A Narrative History of the American Republic: Nation of Nations*. 5th ed. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2005. Print.

DeRose, David. *Sam Shepard*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. Print.

Gallens, Johan. *Dis/figuring Sam Shepard*. New York: P.I.E. Peter Lang, 2007. Print.

Kauffmann, Stanley. "What Price Freedom?" *Saturday Review*. 25th September 1995, 423-430. Web.

Marranca, Bonnie, ed. *American Dreams: The Imagination of Sam Shepard*. New York: PAJ Publications, 1981. Print.

Oumana, Ellen. *Sam Shepard: The Life and work of an American Dreamer*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986. Print.

Rosen, Carol. *Modern Dramatists: Sam Shepard*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

Roszak, Theodore. "Silent Tongue: Sam Shepard's Explorations of Emotional Territory." Interview with Sam Shepard. *The Village Voice*, 4th August 1992: 32-41. Web.

Shepard, Sam. *States of Shock, Far North, Silent Tongue*. New York: Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1992. Print.

Wade, Leslie. *Sam Shepard and the American Theatre*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997. Print.

Wilcox, Leonard, ed. *Rereading Shepard: Contemporary Critical Essays on the Plays of Sam Shepard*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993. Print.

Wade, Leslie A. "States of Shock, Simpatico, and eyes for Consuela: Sam Shepard's plays of the 1990s." in Roudanē, Mathew, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Print.