Summary of the Thesis

IMAGES OF MASCULINITY:
MALE IDENTITY IN SELECTED PLAYS OF SAM SHEPARD

BY:
ROYA YAGHOUBI

This study includes in six chapters. It is based on an analytical reading of Sam Shepard’s selected plays, along with critical books, articles, essays, and notes on his works. It offers an analysis of six plays of Sam Shepard from a gender perspective focusing on male identity and therefore takes into its ambit different theories of masculinity especially those posed by R.W. Connell, Todd W. Reeser, Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, and Anthony Giddens. The plays under scrutiny are: The Tooth of Crime (1972), Buried Child (1978), Fool for Love (1983), States of Shock (1991), Simpatico (1994), and The Late Henry Moss (2000). In all six of these works, male subjectivity is explored.

The introduction will describe the outline of the thesis. It will set out the aims of the study and the problems to be investigated through the study of individual plays. An attempt will be made to analyze critical and academic opinions on Sam Shepard. In this introductory chapter, I also propose a brief examination of American drama in the twentieth century focusing on the Shepard’s contemporaries who are listed in studies of American drama dealing with the issue of masculinity.

Since this study applies various theories associated with masculinity to Shepard’s works in order to examine how male subjectivity is staged by him, the second chapter entitled as “Theories of Masculinities” is dedicated to the theoretical approach that will be followed. This chapter is devoted to the diverse theories of masculinities including: crisis of masculinity, traditional masculinity, de-traditionalization thesis and various types of masculinities such as hegemonic, subordinate, marginalized, complicit, protest, effeminate, emasculated, and female or non-male masculinity proposed by social theorists such as British sociologist Anthony Giddens, Australian
sociologist R.W. Connell, and some other leading theorists of masculinity studies. In addition, this chapter contains the critical discourse analysis emphasizing Michel Foucault’s ideas concerning gender construction. In the end of the second chapter masculinity is treated as an ideology and the structural Marxist theorist Louis Althusser’s views of ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) are discussed in relation to the formation of male subjects.

Shepard’s reputation remains connected to his earlier plays, those fueled by aggression and the attractive qualities of Western manhood. Chapter three under the title “(Challenging) Hegemonic Masculinities” is devoted to a major early rock play The Tooth of Crime (1972). It is the analysis of how hegemonic masculinity is staged in rock drama The Tooth of Crime and therefore takes into its ambit R.W. Connell’s theory of hegemonic masculinity, Foucault’s ideas concerning social discourses and gender construction and finally Althusser’s views of ISAs (Ideological States Apparatuses). After giving introductory remarks on the play itself, the idea of hegemonic masculinity is discussed and how it is challenged in The Tooth of Crime. Afterward it is discussed that hegemonic masculinity is challenged in different ways. Dominative hegemonic masculinity is considered as a performance. Investigating male subjectivity, The Tooth of Crime seems to be related to American maleness. The notion of masculinity is performed in a way that defies any fixity. The Tooth of Crime describes the fact that male subjectivity has not an essential core and is just a performance. Then it is discussed that in The Tooth of Crime, male aggression and violence act as defining features of hegemonic masculinity. Violent and aggressive male behavior is accepted as a normal part of hegemonic masculinity. “It seems to be culturally believed that violence is a natural, practically genetic component of masculinity” (MacKinnon 12). In The Tooth of Crime, Shepard’s most impressive play, noticeable violence is successfully communicated through masculine actions as well as through language and music as defining features of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity emerges and develops from the social and cultural settings and has its own defining characteristics such as chauvinism, violence, aggression, and mental and physical strength or toughness. Next debate considers hegemonic masculinity as a kind of discourse and since discourses are subject to change so dominant hegemonic masculinity changes. In The Tooth of Crime, Shepard stages two different discourses of hegemonic masculinity, the traditional discourse and modern one, in dialogue with each other. Moreover, hegemonic masculinity acts as
an ideology and therefore is shaped and constructed through ISAs, institutions such as arts, and media that produce ideologies and individuals internalize and act in accordance with. Since Shepard utilizes some allusions to Western and gangster film, rock and roll and jazz music, and the drug culture which influence and shape male subjectivity, the influences of popular culture and media as an organization which creates systems of ideas and values are very noteworthy in *The Tooth of Crime*.

Effeminacy, emasculation, and female masculinity are other configurations of masculinity. Effeminate masculinity means that male subjects construct their identity by appropriating traits which seem opposing to masculinity, especially those ascribed to women. A man can acquire woman-like traits or effeminacy to accomplish his objectives which are non-hegemonic. Effeminacy and emasculation are not used interchangeably. Emasculation means to deprive men of strength, vigor, power and force. Emasculation is also rendering male less of a man so that male feels weakened by humiliation. Non-male or female masculinity exhibits that defining characteristics of hegemonic masculinity such as power, strength, toughness or violence are not possessed in or confined to the body of male individuals. Female masculinity gives power and chance to women to move into realm of traditional masculinity which was always occupied by men. It may cause an anxiety in men who are worried not to lose their hold on masculinity.

Divided into two parts, chapter four is entitled “Emasculation, Male Effeminacy, and Female Masculinity” and deals with family plays, namely, *Buried Child* (1978) and *Fool for Love* (1983). In this chapter there is a shift in the focus. These works portray effeminacy, emasculation of male characters, and none-male masculinity and recognize the dangers of relying solely on violence and chauvinism as a definition of self. Shepard’s long-held interest in male aggression, sexual conquest, and violent display continues to be depicted in these plays in a milder degree. What is novel is that women are also given voice and power in these plays to the extent that they go beyond female territory and acquire masculine traits. Dealing with emasculated, effeminate, and female masculinity this chapter depicts men who are often dependent on women. Although women are considered to be secondary in these plays but they are important having their own voice to express themselves.
According to Anthony Giddens, the way subjects construct their identities in contemporary societies has changed radically. His thesis of *Crisis of Masculinity* describes that in advanced industrial societies under the impact of globalization the way people construct their identities has changed. Social and ideological changes lead to changing social location of men which threatens qualities of manliness and finally results in crisis of masculinity. Crisis of masculinity implies that losing their traditional roles in the family and workplace, modern men become dazed and confused about their place in the family and society. They oscillate between traditional conditioning and contemporary demands and desires and never settle fully into either. Exposing that manhood is in crisis, Shepard’s plays from 1990 onwards demonstrate an outlook that distinguishes them from his more well-known works. Chapter five entitled “Crisis of Masculinity: Late Shepard (from 1990 Onwards)” offers a detailed analysis of the three plays Sam Shepard has written during and after 1990: *States of Shock (1991)*, *Simpatico (1994)*, and *The Late Henry Moss* (2000) which involves a shift in the focus in that most emphasis is put on male/male relationship and the idea of manhood in crisis. Shepard’s plays dating from 1990 onwards continue his examination of the American family; war between father and son; fatherhood in crisis; male/male relationship; male/male friendship; sibling rivalry; balanced male; female/male relationship; female masculinity; feminized masculinity; female transcendence over men; the search for love and personal identity; and finally war both political and personal which results in de-mythologized image of war hero as the American manhood.

Chapter Six, the final chapter of my project, would consolidate the arguments of the previous chapters and sum up their main thrust. This chapter would also examine the unique place that Shepard holds among his contemporary playwrights. My study would thus conclude by locating Shepard in the context of the age and depicts his contribution to the dramatic genre. This chapter also delineates other inferences drawn during the course of the study.