

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community

Dr. Pradip Kumar Behera

Lecturer in English
S.K.C.G. (Autonomous) College
Paralakhemundi, Gajapati
Odisha
pradipbehera1972@gmail.com

In *Action*, Shepard's method is both rigorous and less ostentatious. He examines the experience and represents the actual problems encountered by the actor as he confronts his audience. Without the security of a consistent character, all the actor can experience is the enduring presence of himself and the other actors on the stage, and the ever-present necessity of action to relieve the burden of existence. It may well be that Beckett is the inspiration in this, but there is an important difference. Beckett's method is deeply rationalist and show minds, however desperate, insistently ordering the games and rituals which piece out their time within the play. Shepard is more impressionistic and allusive in the way he works, and in *Action*, he emphasizes the arbitrariness of actions. Both audience and actor feel the strain of trying to interrelate the events of the play, and for the actor this means revealing gaps in the performance, the moments where as he moves from action to action, there is a 'stasis'. For the actors 'statis' represents a break down in concentration, the collapse of his imagined world and the loss of the creative scheme of intentions and actions.

As Mc. Crathy points out, "the experience of collapse is crucial to *Action*" (2). The world of images or 'pictures' repeatedly breaks down for Shepard's characters, as does the scheme of intentions and actions. Shepard imagines moments of perfect "statis" in which the actor has nothing to do, and is left to contemplate his presence within a space exposed to a generalized threat. It is out of this experience that Shepard builds up a striking metaphor for a disintegrating society. The characters through their actions represent the broken community. In the play *Action*, Doris Auerbach says: "the picture of America shown is one of disorientation" (42). The four characters, Lupe, Liza, Shooter and Jeep are unable to find their place in society, as

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community - January - March - 2013

they do not realize the proper existence of a healthy community. They completely adrift in a confusing world in which they search for some direction, some reason to take action. As Auerbach points out:

The play projects a world, appearing like a prison that has "no possibility of escape" and crushes the individuals into nothingness, like that of a theatre of Absurd. (45)

But, it cannot be accepted barely that the play is abstract in its effect. Rather, Shepard brings the representation so close to the medium that he is able to reinforce the reality of the characters' 'situation' with the reality of the actor's 'position' - both terms being of considerable importance within the vocabulary of the play. Four characters are witnessed going through the motions; some banal, some extraordinary, of everyday life. It emerged that the characters have mutilated sense of their society and are stranded without a proper relationship to their fellows and without any reliable memory of past events and experiences. The characters Jeep, Shooter, Lupe and Liza have the distances among themselves and the distance between their present and their past.

Unable to decide on the future, the characters feel helpless in the doom of darkness. This miserable condition of the characters has been due to cosmos which acts as the controlling force for human activities on earth. In a sense we are confronted with time by the lack of moral direction by the absence of a sense of progress and continuity and achievement. We have developed a significant boredom in this present life and the root cause of this boredom has been anxiety, unnecessary tension and our inability to keep contact with the cosmic happenings resulting in frustration and despair. As Lisa J. Pagnats observes: "we are too tired, too preoccupied with provocation to demand the fundamental, our right to become ourselves" (78). In the play, *Action*, Shooter speaks to himself about the present condition of the modern world:

SHOOTER: (to himself) That's what I do. I get this feeling I can't control the situation. Something's getting out of control. Things won't work. And then I smash something. I punch something, I scream. Later I find out that my threat is torn. I've torn something loose. (*Angel City and other plays*, 128)

The reality with which the Shepardian theatre is concerned is a psychological reality expressed in images, the projection of the states of mind. The conflicts within the personality of the character, the dramatic tensions produced by the play, the mature revelations at the end of the play, all are expressed through different objects in the form of images. The audience is confronted with actions that lack sufficient spiritual stamina and with the impenetrable darkness which surrounds mankind. Man is so much buried in this material world that he mostly fails to comprehend the mystery and meaning of the cosmos and to recognize the supreme transcendence of the universe. In this state of gloom, the Shepardian cosmos has vital role to play in reshaping the pattern of human life on earth. As Ellen Oumano writes:

American had lost its god and fallen into social and psychological crisis, into a void. Shepard learned remarkable early that vacuum exert a great deal of energy, pulling toward them whatever will fill the emptiness. He observed this spiritual need in himself and in the surrounding culture, and from his observations and his need seems to come the impetus to write to work it out in the most renewing way possible.

(4)

In the plays of Shepard it is found that the human subject is deliberately excluded and the plays are filled with non-characters only. There is no protagonist as in conventional plays, no plot, no coherent dialogue, but only some apparent gestures in this direction. It seems to be "work of signifiers with no signified" (Biggsby, *Beyond Broadway*, 177). We find only the distorted and fragmented spoken words which have no established relations with the speaker. Language is unconventional but it communicates some basic thought, making leaps into the unknown. Images are the expressive elements in Shepard. They express the feelings of the plays and of Shepard. They remind the audience of the chaos in the existing world system. With all the above elements, the play *Action* presents the sense of senselessness of characters' idea on their habitat, in other words to say their community.

As the play proceeds, the characters take turns urgently searching for the lost place in a book, and in so doing build up a picture of a science fiction epic which perhaps records the fate of their own civilization. Lupe's observation on the place is presented in two different dialogues:

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community - January - March - 2013

LUPE: (In the book) wasn't it around where the space ship had collided with the neutron? (137)

LUPE: (referring to book) was it near the place where the sky rained fire? (140)

However, the lost place is their own community. Their present community has become more nuclear in its attitude, ravishing the past sense of morality, spirituality and social harmony. It does not promise a normal existence of human being. So, they behave themselves abnormally. In *Action*, Shepard therefore places the characters in the world of William Beckett. In this way, a character turns himself inside out trying to search for self and reach a consciousness in relation to the world. Love is realized not as a resourceful element, but as a distant memory. The characters are left in a state of listening, witnessing and validating their increasingly desperate condition. Mind is their retreat and they live in the world of illusions. Shooter finds himself in this condition:

SHOOTER: (to Himself) That's what I do. I get this feeling I can't control the situation. Something's getting out of control. Things won't work. And then I smash something.... I scream.... I don't recognize myself. (128-129).

Here, Shepard wants to point out that this is a transient and unsubstantial world. The best defense is to renounce the desires and abandon the delusions, thereby trying to become nothing. Another character Jeep in *Action* narrates his experiences. He is making one sort of escapement from his collapsed community:

JEEP: I couldn't take it. Just thumbing through the book. Not even looking. Not even seeing the papers. Just turning them. Acting it out. Just pretending. (130)

However, the bare stage and the falling light together with the strange appearance of the actors confirm the impression of the aftermath of a crisis in which the little community tries to re-establish itself and recover a framework for a collective existence. But at the conclusion of the play Jeep is evidently lacking such expectation. The possibility of their normal existence as well as the regaining of the old community in the present seems impossible. The characters feel threatened by their position in the community as they picture it:

SHOOTER: Just because we're surrounded by four walls and a roof doesn't mean anything. It's still dangerous. The chances of something happening are just as

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community - January - March - 2013

great. Anything could happen. Any move is possible. I've seen it. You go outside. The world's quiet white. Everything resounding. Not a sound of a motor. Not a light. You see into the house. You see the candles. You watch the people. You can see what it's like inside. (133).

As Shooter develops his picture moving "inside", the threat becomes clearer as he described the "shock" of "being with everyone". In this case the picture of the "inside" deceives:

SHOOTER: It's not how you expected you lose what you had outside. You forget what there even is on outside. The inside in all you know. You hunt for a way of being with everyone. A way of finding how to behave. You find out what's expected of you. You act yourself out. (133)

Shooter realizes both the families and a community which is constituted by them are insecure. The man cannot expect security either inside or outside. Jeep's vision of Walt Whitman as a "passionate father bleeding for his country" (123), represents the old America as bathed in blood. Shooter finds temporary security in his red armchair, which refers to man's serious position at present. He wants to represent himself as a past man of America with the past values:

SHOOTER: This is more like it. This is more in line with how I see myself. I picture myself as father. Very much at home. The world can't touch me. (137)

But, he is not able to cast any spell on the present. Rather, he is isolated from the past. Moreover, he is coaxed and trapped by the present. The possible escape lies only in the imagination:

SHOOTER: I'd give anything just to travel around this space. Just to lick the corners. To get my nose in the dust.... I've ruined it.... I am nowhere. (140)

As Shooter confesses, the man like him is responsible for loosing the community with its proper form. As a result, he finds himself in such a state, when he cannot trust his own body. Shooter relates a story of a man who is afraid of his own body, when he saw it immersed in water for purification. Consequently, that unpurified body kills the self. Shooter and Jeep talking on that:

SHOOTER: Then he began to fear his own body.

JEEP: From that? From seeing in it in the water?

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community - January - March - 2013

SHOOTER: His body killed him, one day it just had enough and killed him. (137)

With the lost of self, man has become indecisive and forgetful of everything. Liza and Shooter burningly represent such state of humanity. They witness and realize the realities, which have affected their habitat and inhabitants. But, adopt the only means of fright-shying:

LIZA: Sometimes I have the idea I know what's happening to us. Sometimes I can't see it. I go blind. Other times I don't have any idea. I'm just eating. (134)

SHOOTER: It's agonizing. All this time I could've swore I was getting something done. I can't even remember eating.... Did we eat already? (142).

The outcome of such conscious escape from the realities leads the characters to a conscious creation of a different world for them. The world is dream-like and absurd. The characters try to watch the gleams of possible reformation of their broken community. In their absurd world they don't pass on humane talks but babble the inharmonious dialogues:

JEEP: I was thinking. If things get worse we should get a cow.

LIZA: Nobody's selling.

JEEP: You've asked around?

LIZA: Nobody's selling.

LUPE: I was thinking chickens would be better.

LIZA: Nobody's selling.

JEEP: That's all right.

LUPE: A goat might be good. (134)

However, there was no way out. The characters exist only for the sake of existence. They do not act their functions but pretend as if they act. The man begins to acquaint himself with the ugly realities of life. As Shooter points out:

SHOOTER: Aaaaaaah! This is the life. Now I'm glad. I went through all that. (136)

Man does not expect to regain the lost country and community. The only root is to make a compromise with the the state of waste and brokenness. As

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community - January - March - 2013

Lupe does: "I don't mind looking for the place" (136). That is why, the hope for re-establishment of the community that was tried by the individuals earlier in the play are not going to turn into reality in anyway. It is not possible to expect the recoming of life in a dead body. That happens at the end of the *Action*. The characters do not get the reformation of their community as per their expectation. They are not able to rebuild their community. Their trial for the replacement of the values of the old community in the new one remains undone. The present community is lacking in its proper feature for the characters. As some of the characters point out:

LUPE: (not looking up) This could never have happened then. Something to do every minute. Always something to do. I once was very active in the community.

JEEP: What's a community?

LUPE: (locking up) A Sense of - A sense um. What's a community Shooter? (138)

The characters do not get any social framework within which to feel at ease. They have the question but not any answer to their question. "Is there anyone to verify"?, Shooter calls from beneath his chair, "To check it out" (144)? However, there is no need of verifying and checking it out. The broken community with its broken idealism has entrapped the man. Jeep in his long dialogue narrates the state of his helplessness.

JEEP: It was like a sweeping kind of terror that struck me. Then something in me would panic. I wouldn't make move. I'd just be standing there very still, but inside something would leap like it was trying to escape. And then the leap would come up against something. It was like an absolutely helpless lead. There was no possible way of getting out. I couldn't believe it. It was like nothing in the whole wide world could get me out of there. I'd relax for a second. I'd be forced to relax because if I didn't, if I followed through with this inward leap, if I let my body do it, I'd just smash my head in or something. I had no relax. That I wasn't getting out. No escape. For a second. Then these thoughts would come. How long was I there for? A day. May be I could last a day. A week. A month? I'd never last a month! FOREVER! That's the thought that did it 'FOREVER'! And the whole thing would start up again.

Sam Shepard's *Action*: The Broken Community - January - March - 2013

Except horse this time. As though it wasn't just a thought. As though it really was. And then I'd start to move. I could not help myself. My body was shaking. (145)

Finally, man's hopes for an ideal community disappear. Man had imagined a community for himself with required perfection. But, with the collapse of the imagination, man finds himself living in the broken community at present. He does not have a specific answer to, who did so to his community and, why?

Works Cited

- Auerbach, Doris. *Shepard, Kopit and the Off-Off-Broadway Theatre*, Boston: G.K.Hall and Co, 1982.
- Bigsby, S.W.E. "Critical Introduction to 20th Century Drama", Vol.30, *Beyond Broadway*, Cambridge U.P., 1994
- Mc Carthy, Gerry. "Acting it Out: Sam Shepard's *Action*", *Modern Drama*, ed. Jill. L.Lavenson. Vol.24, No.1, March 1981 (2).
- Oumano, Ellen. *Sam Shepard: The life and Works of an American Dreamer*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.
- Pegnato, Lisa J. "Breathing in a Different Zone: Joseph Chaikin", *Julane Drama Review*, 25 (Fall.81): 7-8.
- Shepard, Sam. *Angel City, Curse of the Starving Class and Other Plays*, Preface by J.Glever, Pub. Great Britain, 1978.
