



THE MAJOR POSTMODERN ELEMENTS AND THE TREATMENT OF LOVE IN SAM SHEPARD'S 'FOOL FOR LOVE'

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ABSTRACT

Love is the pure form of divine feeling. It is a sacred and unconditional state of mind where one can feel sublime. No matter how it reflects but its impact definitely goes deep into the hearts. Sam Shepard, an American playwright, has also portrayed the varied forms of love in his plays. The one of his written plays, Fool For Love, is entirely based on the love theme and dealt with a very unique relationship between a couple who is 'half brother' or 'half sister' to each other. In the play, this intricate relationship forms its shape along with the major postmodern elements and finally surfaces on the stage reflecting as a different aspect of love. This research paper is a modest endures to discover postmodern elements that have given birth to a new form of thinking in the play.

Key Words: Postmodern elements, Love, Parody, Metafiction, Pastiche, Paradox, Dark Humour, half brother, half sister.

INTRODUCTION

As the title of the paper suggests, the motto of this research tends to find out the major postmodern elements and the treatment of love in Sam Shepard's play 'Fool for Love' therefore, at first I want to discuss postmodernism and its dominating elements. Postmodernism indicates at a particular period liberated from the oppression of the past and

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acknowledges a new, fresh and innovative outlook elevated as a separate movement. In literature, postmodernism has been promoted as a significant element especially used in novels, stories, poems and in plays.

In the late sixties and early seventies, there were various essays published by Leslie Fiedler and Ihab Hassan that proved postmodernism as a movement, especially with reference to America, it was projecting American culture with all its modifications to modernist culture. It has been observed that the postmodern American playwrights deftly used the postmodern elements especially an idea of transformation, pastiche, metafiction, schizophrenia, intertextuality, black humour, and other stylistic techniques in their plays. This way postmodernism in American drama proposes a fresh and innovative reading of the contemporary experimental American theater and acts like a bridge between postmodernism and contemporary drama. It created a new rather an active relationship with the audience and was mostly preferred by intellectuals. The postmodernist approach to literary creation thus intended to show the reader or the audience a way to discern that reality, truth, and experiences were quintessentially subjective. Sam Shepard, being a postmodernist, also dealt with a subjective approach emphasizing more on destructured, decentred and dehumanized subject in many of his plays.

Sam Shepard is ranked as one of the well known postmodern playwrights whose plays have become powerful voice of the American youth and tend to focus on the clashes between different generations and skillful communication that exists within the American language. Shepard formed his image in the society as John Lahr considered him, "The most ruthlessly experimental and uncompromising of today's young writers" (Shepard, Fool for love and other Plays) in the field of American drama. He is enriched with dramatic skills and visionary zeal.

'Theatre Genesis' was one of the well-established theatres that provided platform for young dramatists. Theatre Genesis introduced Sam Shepard as a playwright in 1964 with a series of one-act plays. Shepard has penned numerous short stories, poems, music and dance compositions, and marvellous scripts for movies. He has written more than forty five plays covering a variety of themes including corruption, adultery, treachery and, the disintegration of the family. His characters are always true to the situation and create an image that dramatized the themes of the plays genuinely. They exhibit some hidden aspects of love that may create obscurity on the stage but undoubtedly very true to project reality in front of the audience. Shepard's early and middle age plays highlight strange love relationships between Mother-Son in '*Rock Garden*', Father-Son, and Brother- Sister in '*the Curse of the Starving Class*', and the intricate bond of love and similarity and contrast of identity between the two brothers in '*True West*'.



But the flood of violent emotions, whether of love or hatred, has been depicted passionately in his play *Fool for Love* (1983). It is a claustrophobic trailer-trash love story in which 'Eddie' and 'May' the central figures of the play cannot live without each other and paradoxically are not even satisfied with each other. They attract and repulse each other single-mindedly. Shepard has written and directed a number of plays, and also acted in them, but *Fool for Love* is Shepard's first and only film adaptation of one of his own plays. This play earned him his eleventh OBIE award and his first prize for Best Direction. The OBIE awarded play *Fool for Love* was first performed at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco on 8 February 1983, and ranked as a finalist for the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Particularly for this play, Shepard instructed the directors to perform it without a break.

Description:

It has been observed that Shepard, with few actors and resources, usually succeeds in creating a long-lasting impact on the audiences. The play has only four characters- an Old Man, Eddie, May, and Martin. Eddie and May are former lovers, who meet in a motel room in the 'Mojave Desert'. Both are intensely attracted to each other and are repelled with equal power in an eccentric love-hate relationship between half-siblings. The old man, apparently the father of Eddie and May, is an important character who sits aside in a rocking chair and relates past happenings through a commentary. "*He exists only in the minds of MAY and EDDIE, even though they might talk to him directly and acknowledge his physical presence. THE OLD MAN treats them as though they all existed in the same time and place.*" (Fool for Love 20) Shepard's magic of characterization spellbounds his viewers and inspires them to know the psyche of an individual. Martin is May's new suitor whose presence acts as a catalyst, and makes the battling lovers, Eddie and May, realize their addiction to each other.

Shepard wrote *Fool for Love* right after breaking up with his wife O-Lan. During these tumultuous years he had met the stunning actress Jessica Lange, and fallen in love with her. His intimate love relation with Lange brought out some wonderful changes and he settled down in a 'family' with her. Shepard's urge for a happy and well-settled family is reflected by Eddie when he asks May to come with him to Wyoming. May and Eddie reflect the trueness of emotions that is commonly shared by married couples. Shepard told his friend Joe Chaikin about the play being, "the outcome of all this tumultuous feeling I've been going through this past year. . . it's a very emotional play and in some ways embarrassing for me to witness, but somehow necessary at the same time." ("Fool for Love written by Sam Shepard") C.W.E Bigsby commented on Shepard's art of portraying relationships: "At the initial level of his work Shepard portrays the relation between men and men. He suggests that men are more interesting than women. In fact, Shepard began to get more interested in the relationship between men and women as his work progress." (Modern American Drama



1945-2000) In *Fool for Love* also the audiences witness a variety of love, sometimes with a dark or light shade.

The title “Fool for love” is very suggestive because Eddie and May love each other since their high school days and cannot get away from each other, even though they know they are related to each other as half-brother and half-sister. So these addicted lovers can be called “fools”.

In olden times, the real definition of love was to sacrifice. But in contemporary age, it has changed into possessiveness at its extreme and tends to become criminal. May, the girlfriend of Eddie, being aggressive challenges him, “You’re either gonna’ erase me or have me erased.” and threatens him, “I am. I’m gonna’ kill her and then I’m gonna’ kill you. Systematically.” (Fool 23) Their unstable love leads them into emotional trouble and develops distrust throughout the play. May gets restless and fails to identify how exactly she expects Eddie to behave, “I get sick every time you come around. Then I get sick when you leave. You’re like a disease to me.” (Fool 30) Eddie assures her all the time of his loyalty and compatibility, but finally disappoints her. One thing he is very much sure about their relationship is that May will never replace him and they both will always be connected. His possessive attitude comes out exaggeratedly, “. . . I’m not leavin’. I’m staying’ right here. I don’t care if a hundred “dates” walk through that door . . . I’ll track you down no matter where you go.” (Fool 40) The Old Man’s love for his two wives is the same but, “split in two” (Fool 48)

Dark Humour-

This is the very significant postmodern element which is used to express gloominess of the subject in a very light mode and with a playful manner that helps readers and viewers to recuperate from the agony. In the plays of Shepard, the way of creating humour is caustic even in the state of sadness, depression, and in hopeless situations. The theme of *Fool for Love* also reflects dark humour in which, the central characters Eddie and May love each other passionately, but cannot live together because of their differences. When they live apart, they are still willing to unite. The chemistry between the two is inexplicable.

EDDIE. (after pause) You want me to go?

(She shakes her head.)

MAY. No

.....

EDDIE. I came to see if you were all right.

MAY. I don’t need you!

EDDIE. Okay. (turns to go, collects his glove and bucking strap) Fine.

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MAY. Don't go! (Fool 28)

The situation is ridiculous / sardonic, May wants to throw Eddie out and the very next moment begs him not to leave. The embraced combination of comic and ironic expression is the hallmark of postmodernism that has a psychological approach. May claims ironically, "I'm smarter than you are and you know it. I can smell your thoughts before you even think them." (Fool 23) This paradoxical expression permeates with laughter but insinuates the pathetic situation in which they both are entangled.

Paradox-The play shares paradoxes within the framework of reality and dream, past and present, and truth and lie in such a way that it creates an explosion of emotions. Eddie's father, the Old Man, explains to him the hair-line difference between dream and reality with an example of Barbara Mandrell. They both assume as if the picture of an American singer Barbara Mandrell is hung on the wall. Shepard uses fiction to make the difference clear:

THE OLD MAN. Well, would you believe me if I told ya I was married to her?

EDDIE. (pause) No.

THE OLD MAN. Well, see, now that's the difference right there. That's realism. I am actually married to Barbara Mandrell in my mind. Can you understand that? (Fool 27)

Masculinity-

Apart from paradoxes, masculinity is one of the dominant characteristics of postmodern plays. It is observed either in masculine gender or in feminine but in Shepardian plays this is the first time when Shepard fully characterizes a female character named May, and highlights each and every aspect of her personality. As compare to Eddie, May has numerous shades in her personality one of them is masculinity. Shepard blends two elements- masculinity and visual imagery in his play to uplift the character. For example, May peeps outside through the window and tells Eddie, "It's a big, huge, extra long, black Mercedes-Benz" (Fool 37) and somebody is sitting in the car staring at her. Shepard, only through his visual imagery, establishes one more character who indirectly plays an important role in the play. The character is as 'Countess'. Countess, the suspected girl, creates havoc outside the motel room. Therefore Eddie tries to hide himself along with May by switching off the light repeatedly. May gets irritated and revolts against the countess, "... Come on in here! ... and bring your dumb gun! You hear me? Bring all your weapons and your skinny silly self! I'll eat you alive! (Fool 41) Shepard, in his interview with Mathew Roundane, himself accepts, "She is probably the most solid female character I've written. She really holds her own." (The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard 73)

Pastiche-

In the play, sound effects like explosion of large caliber magnum pistol, shattering of glasses, blaring of horns and slamming of bathroom door play a significant role to create reality. These theatrical techniques nicely blend with postmodern elements like intertextuality either in the form of **parody or of pastiche**. In most cases we observe both the elements present in the text in different contexts. Fredric Jameson claimed, "The general effect of parody is, whether in sympathy or with malice, to cast ridicule." But pastiche can use it in the form of 'cut-up technique' without mixing of genres, as practiced by William S. Burroughs. For Hutcheon "parody is transformational and its relationship to other texts; pastiche is imitative." (qtd in Mambrol Nasrullah, Postmodern use of parody and pastiche) In this play, right from the beginning, I trace textual reference to pastiche as well as parody. For example this extended one-act play starts with the tuneful song of Merle Haggard, "Wake Up" from his album *The Way I Am* (1980). (Fool 19)

Wake up don't just lay there like cold granite stone
Wake up we're too close to be alone
Wake up and please Darling, hold me if you would
Don't just lay there like you've gone away for good. ("Lyrics of Wake Up")

Shepard has taken this song from the album which suits perfectly with the theme and backdrop of the play and correlates with the feeling of the protagonist, Eddie. Sam not only pastiches the genre of song into the play to pay homage to the past styles, but also represents the content of the song to elevate the love emotion of audiences, before the play starts.

Parody-

In the motel room Eddie tries to convince May to come back to him and together they will live in a farm in Wyoming (a state of US) and grow vegetables, and keep horses, chickens etc. Here Eddie sounds like Shepard a rancher, who also yearned for a cowboy life. May vehemently rejects his proposal, "I'm not moving to Wyoming. What's up there? Marlboro Men?" (Fool 24) Marlboro is a cigarette brand and the cowboy type men who featured in the advertisement of Marlboro belonged to Wyoming.

Metafiction-

In deeper sense metafiction is a technique used as a story within the story. We can consider brief stories and quotes as the examples of metafiction because they are the literary creations within the frame work of a creative piece. Shepard consistently uses this element almost in his every play to express the inner thought, paranoia or self-reflexivity and thus reduce, the

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distance between readers and the author. In *Fool for Love* the Old Man, Eddie and then May one by one narrate a story to Martin as well as the audience to expose the reality of the past, and how it affects the present. It is knitted harmoniously within the main story by the playwright.

May in her transformed stage listens to the story which is narrated by the Old Man:

THE OLD MAN. . . . We were drivin' through southern Utah once, I think it was. Me, you and your mother- in the old Plymouth we had. You remember that Plymouth? Had a white plastic hood ornament on it. Replica of the Mayflower I think it was. Some kind o' ship. Anyway . . . you were sound asleep in the front. And all of a sudden you woke up crying . . . I stopped the Plymouth by the side of the road . . . carried you into this field . . . I saw somethin' move out there. Somethin' bigger than both of us put together. And it started to move toward us kinda' slow.

(May begins to crawl slowly on her hands and knees from down-right corner towards bed . . . grabs pillow and embraces . . .)

. . . It was so black out there I could hardly make out my own hand . . . And just then these things started to "moo" . . . And it turns out, there we were, standin' smack in the middle of a goddamn herd of cattle . . . (Fool 32-33)

The story is also about human fear that surfaces in darkness, but disappears as soon as one faces it. The same way in real life too, we have some base-less problems that can easily be handled only by facing them. Further in the story Shepard mentions 'Plymouth car' and compares its size with 'Mayflower'. If we consider the historic reference, it suggests **historiographic metafiction**. Plymouth is a port city in England. Mayflower was an English ship that carried pilgrims on voyage from Plymouth to the New World in 1620. ("Mayflower")

While listening to the story May's childish behaviour (crawling and embracing a pillow) shows **temporal disorder** in which she transforms into her past and suddenly when she leans back in the chair she comes back to the present, to a normal state. Disruption of the past with disruption of the present enacted on stage is known as temporal disorder. This postmodern element creates anachronism on the stage and helps the audience to relate to the scene and provide necessary information.

The next story highlights the two aspects of life truth and fiction along with the intricacy of the love relation. As Martin enters into the motel room in the darkness, he witnesses an awkward condition and tries to pull apart Eddie and May. Later Eddie clarifies him, "No.

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She's my sister. (*he and THE OLD MAN look at each other, then he turns back to MARTIN*) My half-sister. (Fool 47) Martin does not feel good and comments, "Well- um- that's illegal, isn't it? Eddie labours to explain the intricate relationship with a real story of his past. In between, Martin and the Old Man converse with Eddie as well. Shepard experiments with metafiction by twisting the concept of truth and fiction. Eddie and May retell the same story differently according to their own perspectives. Now, Martin and the audience are allowed to choose and rely on the version of the stories by their own.

EDDIE. Well, see- (pause, he stares at The OLD MAN) - Our daddy fell in love twice. That's basically how it happened. Once with my mother and once with her mother.

.....
EDDIE. . . . He'd disappear for months at a time and she never once asked him where he went . . .
.....

EDDIE. But one night I asked him if I could go with him. And he took me . . . And we just kept walking silent like that for miles until we got to town . . . Then vague faces began to appear. And, as we got closer, I could recognize one of the faces. It was Spenser Tracy. Spenser Tracy moving his mouth. Speaking without words . . . And we never said a word the whole time. Then, finally we reached this little white house . . . he rang the bell . . . then this woman comes to the door. This real pretty woman with red hair. And she throws herself into his arms. And he starts crying . . . like a baby . . . behind them both, I see this girl . . . But the second we saw each other, that very second, we knew we'd never stop being in love. (Fool 50)

As soon as the story comes to an end, May blames Eddie, "He's told me that story a thousand times and it always changes." May claims to know the story exactly the way it happened. Her mother was obsessed with her father who was always in a paranoiac state, "The more filled with terror that the two lives would find out about each other and devour him whole. That his secret would take him by the throat. But finally she caught up with him." She continues narrating, ". . . as soon as we'd found him - he disappeared . . . nobody saw him after that. Ever. And my mother - just turned herself inside out . . . as though somebody'd died." (Fool 53)

At last, Eddie and May reunite and engross deeply into each other's eyes. As they embrace and kiss they hear the sound of loud collision and wild screaming of horses. Eddie gets worried about his trailer and horses therefore he leaves the room and goes out. Most of the critics unanimously promote that *Fool for Love* is a "furiously funny, unnerving, engaging and a very verse courageous sexy play." (Thomas S. Hischak 223)

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Abrupt End of the play-

Shepard concludes this play at the juncture, when Eddie and May have the hope and desire to reunite. He (Eddie) once again abandons her alone as her father left her mother alone, hence she decides to move out and leaves the audience expecting “. . . the two incestuous lovers continue their tempestuous love affair.” (Thomas S. Hirschak 223) Bewildered Martin stares at the open door. The Old Man starts moving back to the platform and utters “Ya’ see that picture over there? . . . That is the woman of my dreams . . . And she’s mine. She is all mine. Forever.” (Fool 57)

The last two lines of the Old Man have multiple meanings. One way of interpretation directs towards an imaginary love which will last forever. The other way suggests that never long for true love, but instead try to love selflessly. In the postmodern era, a common man feels dejected and pessimistic, but he rejoices.

Sam Shepard thus leads us into the dark alleys of the minds of characters who inhabit his plays. By his dexterous use of various techniques he conveys his theme in a complex manner. His ability to create humour even in the most unwarranted situations, gives an edge to his writing.

CONCLUSION-

The *Fool for Love* play is unique for its emotional aspects especially handling of love, stage directions, stage setting and meticulous concept of relative truth. The abrupt end of the play again opens numerous possibilities to talk about that prove it worthy to be called as a postmodern play. Simultaneously I have observed the well knitted use of parody, pastiche, faction, postmodern irony, playfulness and paradox in this play that fulfill the motto of a perfect piece of art. Shepard used the postmodern element ‘metafiction’ (story within the story) in this play with the addition of some threads of experimentation and historiographic metafiction too where a single story was presented by May, Eddie and Old Man with different perspectives and interpretations. Shepard throughout the play deftly introduced dark humour that straight away hit the audiences and surged out with a strong desire to have true love, peace and stability in the life of a careworn couple.



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