A Survey of Man's Alienation in Modern World: Existential Reading of Sam Shepard's *Buried Child* and *True West*

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Abstract

This paper aims at recalling different modes of alienation in modern world and looks closely at modern alienations of characters in Sam Shepard's buried child and true west. The researchers try to analyze the mentioned works by applying Sartre's ethical alienation and Heidegger's ontological alienation on these works. It is tried to make it precise that in Sartre's philosophy alienation occurs when human beings refuse to accept 'responsibility' for their own freedom. In addition, Heidegger's notion of 'authenticity' is discussed as contradiction to this Sartrean alienation and fallen understanding.

Key words: Shepard, alienation, ontological alienation, responsibility, Sartre, Heidegger, authenticity.

1. Introduction

The ideas on alienation have become quite widespread in recent years, and many societies in earlier stages of history have experienced these notions. But both in its form and in its extent the modern alienation differs from that of preceding time. It has now become much more intensified and broader, and has actually turned into a prevalent trend.

According to Robert T. Tally , "The term alienation has its simple meaning–a condition of being estranged from someone or something–but it also has technical meanings. For instance, in law, alienation refers to a conveyance of property; something is said to be 'alienable' if it can be sold. Alternately Thomas Jefferson's famous rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are so tied to the essence of mankind to be 'inalienable' right; in social psychology, alienation refers to a person's psychological withdrawal from society. In this sense, the alienated individual is isolated from other people; taken to an extreme, such psychological isolation expresses itself in neurosis. In critical social theory alienation has an additional sense of separating the individual from his or herself, a fragmentation of one's self through work" (2).

On the whole, there are three types of alienation common in literature. First, the man's alienation from himself. Modern man often finds it hard to be himself; he has become a stranger to himself. Second, he has become estranged or alienated to his fellow man. He experiences alienation from the world in which he lives in, and finally alienation of man from God. In existential writing, the concept of alienation is used primarily to refer to a kind of psychological and spiritual malaise which is pervasive in modern society though it is not specific to it.

2. Existentialism and Alienation

The concept of alienation is one of the most important bequests of Hegel's philosophy. It is central to Hegel's account of the development of spirit, and thus of the process of human 'self-development'. "This self is a historical and social creation.

It develops through a process of alienation and its overcoming, self-estrangement and self-recognition, a 'fall' into division and reconciliation" (Sayers, 2). Hegel's ideas were taken up by Marx in his early works, from which one of the main strands of contemporary thought about alienation has grown, which is sociological alienation. Hegel′s philosophy also provoked a quite different critical response initiated by Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard′s theory was formed in the Hegelian aftermath, but on the contrary to that of Hegel′s philosophy. This counteraction is believed to be the first example of existentialist way of thinking about the issue of alienation. By alienation Hegel refers to the process by which 'finite spirit,' the human self, externalizes itself, and then confronts its own other being as something separate, distinct, and opposite to it.

Kierkegaard′s philosophy is formed in response to Hegel in that in the present age, individuals are estranged from themselves and from the world, which is experienced as hostile to subjectivity and individuality rather than Hegel's notion of self-constitution and reconciliation. Such estrangement takes the form of 'inauthenticity' in Heidegger′s theory: "of not being oneself or true to oneself. 'Inauthenticity' is our normal, 'every day' state. It is not specific to modern society or to any particular social or historical condition. Inauthenticity is that kind of being which is closest to 'Dasein'-[Heidegger 'Dasien' de facto means being itself]- and in which Dasein maintains itself for the most part" (Ibid, 6).
After Heidegger it was Sartre, commonly considered as the father of existentialist philosophy, whose writings cleared the road for intellectual existence in the decades following the Second World War. Sartre talks about freedom. He says: "we are free because we are not a self (an in-itself) but a presence to-self. This implies that we are 'other' to ourselves" (Existentialism, 2009). This inner distance forms the site of what Sartre calls freedom as the definition of man. To that freedom corresponds a co-extensive responsibility. "We ourselves are responsible for our world and our choice. But when we refuse this responsibility, 'alienation' happens" (Ibid).

3. Heidegger's Ontological Alienation

According to Taylor Carman in *Authenticity* (2005), 'Authentic' (Eigentlich) is one of Heidegger's favorite words , and it occurs throughout 'Being and Time' in both technical and non-technical terms. Informally, and in ordinary speech, the word is emphatic and simply means 'Real' or 'Actual'. As a technical term, the word plays two different functions: On the one hand, the word 'eigentlich' which means own, proper, and peculiar. What is 'eigentlich' then is what is most Dasein′s own, what is most proper or peculiar to it. Indeed, one of the archaic senses of the English word 'authentic' is precisely 'belonging to himself , own, proper'. Authentic modes of existence, in this strictly formal sense, are those in which Dasein stands in a direct relation to itself. This sense of authenticity says nothing about what is better or worse for Dasein, but merely marks a distinction between one′s immediate relation to oneself and one′s mediate relation to others or to oneself as another. Authenticity consists in our understanding of the ontological structure of the first person, or what Heidegger calls Dasein′s 'mineness'. On the other hand 'authenticity' functions as an evaluative term describing a desirable or a choice-worthy mode of existence.

It is something good. Under this normative aspect, Heidegger distinguishes not two but three possibilities: "Dasein's being, he says, is subject to authenticity or inauthenticity or the modal undifferentiatedness of the two. Modal undifferentiatedness, or indifference, between authenticity and inauthenticity is what Heidegger calls Dasein′s 'average everydayness' which is neither good nor bad, but neutral. This undifferentiatedness of Dasein's 'everydayness' is not anything, but rather a positive phenomenal character of this entity. All existing, such as it is, flows from this mode of being, and back into it. We call this everyday undifferentiatedness of Dasein, 'averageness'" (Heidegger, 43). One might suppose, for example, that the very distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity makes sense only with reference to a normative ideal of integrated selfhood, of integrity understood as being oneself or being true to oneself. And at first glance, anyway, Heidegger's account seems to bear this out. In everyday life he says: "first and for the most part Dasein is not itself and this is possible only because there is a determinate mode of being of the I, itself that consists precisely in 'a loss of self'"(Ibid, 116). "Indeed, one of the modes of falling and inauthenticity is precisely 'alienation'"(Ibid, 178). As Heidegger's inauthenticity is our normal 'everyday' state, it is not specific to modern society or to any particular social or historical conditions. On the contrary, for Heidegger, "inauthenticity is that kind of being which is closest to Dasein maintains itself for the most part.

Authenticity is a mode of being in the world and being with others" (Sayers, 6). Or better said, "To be authentic is to be true to one′s own self, to be one′s own person, to do one′s own thing. Authenticity doesn't need of course to imply eccentricity. Eccentricity can be inauthentic, while conformity to standard practices can be authentically chosen" (Inwood, 26). What is authentic in the descriptive sense of the word is what formally unique and particular to each individual human being." What is authentic, then, is what is most my own, what is essentially most proper or peculiar to me"(Ibid, 26). "For Heidegger this notion of authenticity has no normative import, but merely indicates a formal distinction between the self′s relation to itself and its relation to others. Authenticity in this sense is neither good nor bad, but has to do instead with my unique relation to myself in my existence, in contrast to my relations to others, or to myself regarded from a second or third person point of view" (Olafson, 233).

But it is important to say that in many places in 'Being and Time', the term 'authentic' obviously refers to something good, 'inauthenticity' something bad. "In this normative sense of the words, authenticity and inauthenticity are not exhaustive categories, but lie at the ends of a spectrum, whose middle Heidegger describes as a kind of modal undifferentiatedness or 'indifference' that undifferentiated middle range, neither authentic nor inauthentic is the 'average everydayness' that serves as a neutral starting point. Everydayness is the bland, undifferentiated state in which one′s actions and attitudes are neither particularly authentic nor inauthentic. An indifferent condition in which one is neither especially owing up to oneself, evading one′s unique situation, nor fleeing into anonymous generic forms of self-understanding" (Ibid, 233).

The norm of authenticity refers to a kind of 'transparency' with regard to one's situation, "a recognition that I am a being who can be responsible for who I am. In choosing in light of this norm I can be said to recover myself from alienation, from my absorption in the anonymous 'one-self' that characterizes me in my everyday engagement in the world. Authenticity thus indicates a certain kind of integrity not that of a pre-given whole, an identity waiting to be discovered" (Stanford Encyclopedia, Authenticity). Authenticity defines a condition on self-making. We spoke of the existentialist project of becoming an individual. Authenticity is a feature of the existentialist individual. "In fact existential individuality and authenticity seem to imply one another. One is not born an individual (in the existentialist sense) than is one born authentic. To be truly authentic is to have realized one′s individuality and vice versa" (Flynn, 74). The person who avoids choice, who becomes a mere face in the crowd, fails to become authentic.

4. Sartre's Ethical Alienation

Ethic is by definition an abstract fact. It is the goal one gives to oneself when there is no goal. "It is a certain way of treating others when one has no other relation to others except the purely ontological relationship. Therefore, it appears when my relation to others is defined by the purely formal recognition of his universal personhood. But this universal personhood is itself defined by his freedom" (Sartre, 103). Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943) indicates: "first, there is the issue of freedom as a primary characteristic of human existence; second, there is the claim that since there is no God, there are no priori value that can serve as the basis for ethical decisions (and even if there were a God, it would make no difference in this regard, since values too are ultimately dependent on free choice); and third, there is the claim that my freedom necessarily is linked to other's freedom. Indeed I am not free unless others are as well. It is however, one thing to say that freedom and human identity need to be thought alongside one another; the difficulty is to find a way of doing so.

What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of 'human reality.' Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently. There is no difference between the being of man and his being-free" (Sartre, 2). "Sartre greatly enlarged the place assigned to freedom in his account of the human subject. The non-being that Heidegger had made was straightforwardly identified with the consciousness by Sartre. From this bold assimilation he drew the consequence that freedom constitutes the human essence. We are, as he puts it in words, 'condemned to be free,' by the fact that we are always in situations that present alternatives, and so our lives have to be understood in terms of the choices we have to make, even if it is only by doing nothing" (Olafson, 268). An essential adjunct to Sartre's theory of human freedom is thesis about the unwillingness of human beings to acknowledge their being radically free in his sense.

This thesis is best known as an indictment of the 'bad faith' that is implicit in the various stratagems by which we try to avoid any such acknowledgment. "We insist for example, that we have no choice when we obviously do, no matter how inconvenient it maybe for us. We also talk about ourselves as though we were all of a piece, endowed with some 'nature' from which all our actions, no matter how objectionable they may be to others, flow as if by some unchangeable logic of necessity. If there is any existential virtue implicit in Sartre's account of these matters, it is one based on the avoidance of 'bad faith' and the open acknowledgment that we are in fact choosing when we might otherwise be tempted to claim that we are not, and that matters are somehow beyond our control. This is in a way a concept of 'responsibility'. Because it clearly rules out the kinds of fraudulent justifications we so often offer to people we have offended or injured in some way. Responsibility is not a solipsistic exercise of such a kind; it is being answerable to someone for something. That means that the agent shares at least some understandings with the person affected by his action" (Olafson, 269).

Sartre says when human is ignorant to accept the responsibility of his freedom, alienation occurs. He mentions: "one aspect of alienation is ignorance. It is a mode of inter-human relations. Its type is that of refusal in the sense that to be judged ignorant by others acts as a cause does on my freedom. When I am ignorant in solitude, either I'm unaware that I am ignorant or I know it, it must be mentioned that in the first case, to be unaware of my ignorance clearly is not equivalent to knowing what I am doing, but the double negative lifts from ignorance its limiting exteriority. My knowledge is limited by nothing, since my unawareness of it is nothing. There is no outside to consciousness or to knowledge. There is just an impulse toward the project, toward understanding, toward truth which is positive. There are affirmations but no consciousness comes along and puts them between parentheses. There is a finite but not limited positively, my freedom is still completely there" (Sartre, 294).

All history has to be comprehended as a function of that primitive alienation that mankind cannot get out off. "Alienation is not oppression. It is the predominance of the other in the pair other and same, the priority of the objective, and consequently the necessity of all behavior and ideology to project itself into the element of the other and to return to their promoters as alienated and alienating. The alienated person is also completely outside of alienation, he regains himself in his pure subjectivity. He is also alienated in the mode of having to be so, wholly in his ideas and wholly outside of them" (413). This is the dominant alienation in modern society.

5. *Discussion*

Undoubtedly *Buried Child* is one of the most known and quoted plays written by Sam Shepard. The play which brought him Pulitzer Prize in 1979. The moral decline in this story is expressed between parents and their children. Another play, another deconstructed family. "Shepard himself had grudgingly acknowledged that the family had, against his own instincts, become if not his subject then the environment of his drama" (Roudane, 21). The death of American myth, decadence, and corruption in this play is based on inauthenticity and irresponsibility of its personages.

In *Buried Child* every single character except Shelly, Vince's girlfriend, is suffering from identity crisis which has caused internal and external malfunctioning including self-dilapidation and social alienation. "Shepard's plays" as Annette J. Saddik wrote "deal with the fragile boundaries of identity and the impossibility of locating an authentic self-outside of the roles, masks, images and performances that mark human action" (Saddik, 131). Maybe the family's problem is inherited from Dodge, an irresponsible patriarchal center of the family who is buried symbolically by his eldest son Tilden under corn husks:

> Dodge. (to Tilden) where'd you get that?
> Tilden. picked it.
> Dodge. you picked all that?
> (Tilden nods.)
> Dodge. you expecting company?
> Tilden. No.
> Dodge. where'd you pick it from?
> Tilden. right out back.
> Dodge. out back where?

Tilden. right out in back.
Dodge. there's nothing out there!
Tilden. there's corn.

Like the protagonists of *True West*, Dodge in *Buried Child* is engrossed with TV, and attempts to conceal his guilt, irresponsibility, and inauthenticity by means of drinking. Instead of the crops, Dodge seeds his farm with the corps of the incestuous infant of Tilden and his wife and causes infertility for his following generations. And he "tries to deny the possibility of new growth, even as Tilden covers him with the corn he has picked" (Abbotson, 161). Another similarity between *True West* and *Buried Child* is in that corruption and displacement start from patriarchy or better said the centers of both families. This alienation is clearly perceived when Dodge doesn't accept Bradley as his own child:

Dodge. Bradley doesn't even live here!
Halie. it's his home as much as ours. He was born in this house!
Dodge. he was born in a hog wallow.
Halie. Don't you say that! Don't you ever say that!
Dodge. he was born in a goddamn hog wallow! That's where he was born and that's where
   he belongs! He doesn't belong in this house!

Or vice versa when Bradley tries to show his dominance to his father by cutting his hair short:
Halie's voice. he feels responsible.
Dodge. for my hair?
Halie's voice. for your appearance.
Dodge. my appearance is out of his domain! It's even out of mine! In fact, it's
   disappeared! I'm an invisible man!

The same presence happens when Vince comes back after some years to his grandparents' house is not remembered in first sight and searches for his own authenticity:
Vince. grandpa?
(Dodge looks up at him, not recognizing him.)
Dodge. did you bring the whisky?
Vince. grandpa, its Vince. I'm Vince. Tilden's son. You remember?
(Dodge stares at him.)

Halie, Dodge's wife and mother of the family, seems to be morally and socially decayed. She is introduced as an incestuous woman who had an affair with his son, Tilden, and delivered an infant who is buried alive by Dodge. She is "either offstage or reminiscing about a son who died, called Ansel" (Abbotson, 52). She leaves home in the beginning of the play and returns back at the end of the play by drank abusive Father Dewis, who signifies the immorality and inability of church to guide its people in modern family and world.

It is declared that sons and the grandson of the family are not any better than their parents. Tilden is talked about beforehand, and Bradley whose alienation is symbolically demonstrated in his physical disability has kind of repressive attitudes which is understood by his metaphorical raping of Shelly when he puts his fingers in her mouth. The same debasement happens when Tilden caresses Shelly's fur coat:

Tilden. can I touch your coat?
Shelly. my coat? (She looks at her coat then back to Tilden) sure.
Tilden. you don't mind?
Shelly. No. go ahead.
(Shelly holds her arm out for Tilden to touch. Dodge stays fixed on TV. Tilden moves
   in slowly toward Shelly, staring at her arm. He reaches out very slowly and touches
   her arm, feels the fur gently then draws his hand back. Shelly keeps her arm out.)

But in contrast to all this inauthenticity the traces of hope and authenticity is followed by Shepard in this play. He "sees the American tendency toward denial as self-destruction, and suggests that it is better for people to accept their guilt in order for life to go on" (Abbotson, 49). This process of continuity is put in word when Tilden says that "you gotta talk or you'll die" (Saddik, 149).

Dodge is characterized like phoenix; he dies in order to empower new found Vince. Because "for Shepard the 'real' finds its authenticity in death" (Roudane, 290). Lost authenticity of self is hoped to be redeemed in *Buried Child* in contrast to that of *True west*. "This 'confusion' of role and being, performance and authenticity, is at the center of Shepard's characters' search for a stable identity, a fixed reality that both eludes and threatens to trap them as they perform the instabilities of postmodern identity in the late twentieth century" (Ibid, 130).

The play *True West* was first staged at San Francisco's magic theatre in the summer of 1980 and can be read as one of the Shepard's most poignant inquiries into the ironic process of working both in the film industry and as a playwright. *True West* introduces two brothers, far different from each other, Austin and Lee. Shepard's play emphasizes that, despite the American belief in starting a new, the past is never over but continues to intrude into the present. Consequently the two characters want to escape from the responsibility of their past and go to desert. Lee is a drifter and a thief who drops to their mom's house that Austin is house-sitting uninvited, while his younger brother is a Hollywood screen writer and a family holder. These two brothers can be analyzed through series of binary oppositions: one sophisticated, cultured, ambitious, and successful; the other alienated, outcast, raw , wild, and violent. The ferocity with which they fight to one another indicates not only a deep-seated conflict between them, but also the lack of authenticity and the refuse of accepting the responsibilities of the ways they have chosen for their lives. As Sartre says "importantly, this (Responsibility) explains our lives as an unfolding of a script with which we are already familiar, why our existence has the character of choosing ourselves, of responsibility, and not of being chosen" (Gradner, 164). The notion of authenticity can be discussed as two brothers attempt to write a Western by means of which they try to find their hidden 'selves' and to prove their 'beingness':

> Lee. so ya' think there's room for a real western these days? A true-to-life western?
> Austin. there's nothin' real down here, Lee! Least of all me!
> Lee. What I need is somethin' authentic. somethin' to keep me in touch. It's easy to get outa' touch out there.

Shepard's dramatic idiosyncrasy in general and particular in *True West* is that of a complicated and unhappy situation where personages suffer extraordinary anxiety due to the instability and lack of authenticity of their selfhood. As an example of this inauthenticity we can refer to Austin's unfamiliarity to his old living place:

> Austin. There's nothin' down here for me. There never was. When we were kids here it was different. There was a life here then. But now – I keep comin' down here thinkin' it's the fifties or somethin'. I keep finding myself getting off the freeway at familiar landmarks that turn out to be unfamiliar. On the way to appointments. Wandering down streets I thought I recognize that turned out to be replicas of streets I remember. Streets I misremember. Streets I can't tell if I lived on or saw in the postcards. Fields that don't even exist anymore.

On the other hand, Austin's older brother, Lee was from the first stage alienated. He was living alone, wandering in deserts, clutching to robbery. He pities his father's disappearance in social life and relies on drinking in order to be away from pains of consciousness. Then he finds another alternative for reviving his own authenticity through writing a screenplay:

> Lee. I got a Western that'd knock yar lights out.
> Saul. oh really?
> Lee. yeah. Contemporary Western. Based on a true story. Course I'm not a writer like my brother here. I'm not the man of pen.
> Saul. Well.
> Lee. I mean I can tell ya a story off the tongue but I can't put it down on the paper. That don't make any difference though does it?
> Saul. no. not really.
> Lee. I mean plenty a guys have stories don't they? True life stories. Musta been a lota movies made from real life.

They endeavor to defend themselves against the weight of the past and the anxiety of the present. As a result, they search a deeper but an unreal origin in order to find their authenticity. To fulfill this search of identity and authenticity Austin forces Lee to leave his newly achieved artificial personality and accompany him to desert. In other words, Austin is synchronizing with alienated part of Lee, the part that Lee was himself trying to escape from. According to Heidegger to be authentic means to be true to ourselves. "so far as I refuse or fail to consider certain options for the reason that 'they', 'one', or 'we' do not do such thing, my condition is one of 'inauthenticity' rather than 'authenticity', and I have ceded my decision to 'others' or rather to the anonymous 'they'. To be authentic is to be true to one's own self, to be one's own person, to do one's own thing" (Inwood, 26). Somewhat they are going after their inauthentic father and try to attribute their irresponsibility to freedom of choice and a kind of escape from beingness. Austin who was finding Lee a lamebrain is now enjoying his 'whatness':

> Austin. I'm enjoying your company, Lee. For the first time since your arrival I am finally enjoying your company. And now you want me to go outside and drink alone?

At this stance the brothers start to lose their own identities and follow the characteristics of two lamebrains in Texas in Lee's western fiction. Austin forgets his ethical responsibilities towards society and his families and instead of writing and constructing the superstructure turns to a boor. Like the archetype of Able and Cain who were not able to keep the earth clean and shed each other's blood, Austin tries to suffocate his brother by phone cord:

> [during this Austin has picked up the ripped-out phone from the floor and wrapped the cord tightly around both his hands, he lunges at Lee whose back is still to him, wraps the cord around Lee's neck, plants a foot in Lee's back and pulls back on the cord, tightening it.]

Conclusion

Overall, in twentieth century, especially after world wars, deep moral values in people around the universe were removed. This dilapidation was more visible in Western and European societies. As T. S. Eliot says in his *The Waste Land (1992)* there was no centre to aggregate people together again:

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,   *20*
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter , the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water

Lack of identity in modern man caused many social and psychological problems intensifying the motif of meaninglessness of the life. This alienation and displacement were supported by literature and especially theatrical movements. Theatre of Absurd paid its tribute to these movements more than any other schools. Lost generation seemed is not going to be revived. Elements of hope were soon disappeared after some sparks. In modern drama, undoubtedly American theatre was leading apparatus for condemning this depression and decadence, for more than any other country they've been encountered with death of morality and inauthenticity. Their leaders' irresponsibility for their people's freedom and tranquility caused death of American beauty and western myths. Sam Shepard dedicated much of his literary life to demonstrate this inauthenticity prevalent in American communities and families. Many of his major plays show alienation of man with men. For him and other modern writers religion was stale. It was corrupt like other social institutions. So character's in order to be clutched somewhere were led towards alcoholism and more immoralities his dramas.

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