

SAM SHEPARD'S FRAGMENTED VISION IN *ANGEL CITY*: A CRITICAL STUDY

Dr. Pradeep Kumar Debata
Faculty of English
Kp, KIIT University
Bhubaneswar, Odisha

The *Angel City* represents a climax of the first decade of Sam Shepard's work. The play possesses the unmistakable of Shepard, the avant-gardist with its surrealistic dream structure and its creative transformational character. It shows Shepard's bizarre sense of humour with its satanic attack on the world of Hollywood. His America emerges largely as a land of unfulfilled promises and loss of attachment. It is an economic jungle thriving on exploitation and excess profit. The American dream for success has lost its contact with the mythic past in which purity of self, cleanliness of life and dignified manners are heightened. The absence of the country's myth and the loss of certainty have been described in the plays of Shepard as the apple of discord of all misfortunes and disappointments.

Therefore, we find here that Shepard creates in his plays some mythical and divine values of Gods and Angels and uses strong and resourceful cowboys as the mythic figures of the American west. Yet images of incest, nymphomania, impotence abound in the plays, suggesting the moral degeneration and the poisoning of the culture. In an interview with Carol Rosen, Shepard points out:

“Myth always refers to social reality, to the rites and institution of society, and hence in its symbolic representation of the different rites.”

It is very clear that Shepard's plays expose the very very spirit of the age, abandoning the system of exploitation of human being and avoiding their rights to self-fulfilment and social upliftment, and consider them as mechanical tools. Shepardian world is filled with cosmic values. The images of the Sun, Moon, blue-sky, large ocean, idleness stars, which spring up in his plays that give readers impression of a different Shepardian cosmos. For the characters of Shepard, cosmic values are insignificant. What is significant for them is their familiarity with the material world, with the economic prosperity and comfort. They are unable to look at the sun, moon, and other planetary bodies with the same cosmic vision as the ancient people used to. It is that either they are acquainted sufficiently with the cosmic objects or that they do not want to include them in their worldly projects. Shepardian characters are blind-folded in a world of material success, which is simply an allusive and they never achieve real success. After a long nourishment of the vision of success, the characters get it uncertain, unfulfilled and fragmented

It becomes obvious that when we examine Shepard's most applauded play, the *Angel City* in which a group of persons unite a dream about a new adventure in the Hollywood film industry. As Carol Rosen puts “*Angel City*, explores the playwright's own cinematic imagination, his impulse towards a filmic vocabulary, rooted in myths about power”. (Rosen, 39) Having placed themselves far from the human reality, some men want to produce something new which will be palatable to America's contemporary technique. Here in the play the characters like Wheeler, Lanx, Rabbit, Tympani, and Miss Scoons practise magic trance states, dream visions and nightmares to create something new, in the Hollywood film world in the form of a surprise, which would certainly stun the people disturbed in their own situations.

As Wheeler states: “Not simply an act of terror, but something which will in-fact drive people right off the deep and end. Leave them blithering in the aisles. Create mass hypnosis. Suicide. Auto-destruction. Something which will open entirely new facts in Sado-masochism. Penetrating every layer of their dark sub-conscious and leaving them totally unrecognizable to themselves. Soothing which not only mirrors their own sense of doom, but actually creates the possibility of it right there in front of them” (*Angel City*, P.15) .

In the same, Tympani imagines and answers the question of Rabbit, the actor:

TYMPANI: In experimenting with various rhythm structures in the house of discovering one which will be guaranteed to produce certain trance states in masses of people (16)

But what ultimately the play projects is that all attempts end in disastrous failure as the characters lack co-ordination and imagination .So the play becomes a mocking serio-comedy which seems to discover the sickness behind the Celluloid dream machine through magic, trance states and fights of fantastical mystery. As a result, Wheeler sorrowfully expresses the ultimate failure of his great project:.....It was gamble right from the start .I gambled on imagination and lost. My dean was to create an industry of imagination. Now look at it. Poisoned, putrefied (42).

It is only a noble soul on earth that sees virtues. But, on the contrary, the selfish vicious fail to get redemption with all integrity of soul .Hence Shepard comes across hell as the only place for them to live in. Hell is psychologically a state of complete inner isolation in a motionless, soundless world. The dark world of hell seemed to lie, for the Shepardian Characters stricken beneath the cold moon and the lidless stars. The cosmic images like hell, heaven, blue sky are metaphysical metaphors. Through the comic images Shepard depicts loss and waste to all social and political institution. But, man’s aloofness from all moral virtues has been instrumental in making the world a hell with negative virtues.

Shepard’s world, however idiosyncratic, is of course, America. He has analysed the American problem in which an assumed strength of identity was exposed and the social components of that identity are being exposed through his conscious use of images. The characters reflecting the country and complicate state are represented at the edge of their despair. They are lost in a situation of pain, anguish and the powerlessness. The characters the pain , who are concerned and subjugated to the will of an overwhelming social setting .Shepard simply show pain , deformities wounds, inertia and drudgery of the claustrophobic souls on stages. At the outset of the *Angel City*, Lanx, a stricken filmmaker, refers to a dingy, crime-ridden American environment: (As though reading from a script).It’s a great office. A great window. A great life .All hell passes before me, and I can watch it like a jungle. (7).

As Lionard Wilcox observes: In *Angel City*, Hollywood represents an entropic principle, a decreptive universe .It represents the “dream dumb” a region of exhausted cultural icon and immoral fantasy. Moreover, Hollywood in the play represents not only a landscape of profound instability and entropy but one on which American vision of success has been betrayed. The play also reveals a dark vision of “non-existence” from the stimulated world of Hollywood and from the already written “Universe of Pop discourses”. (P.63) Shepard wants its audience to realize the immanent problems engulfing mankind today, and to include those problems in their lives and learn the lessons out of it. Through his plays Shepard continues to draw the public attention towards mythic figures and cosmic values so as to bring about a distinction between the *Angel City* in which we live and the *Angel city* of the Gods and the Angels.

In fact, Shepard's *Angel City* is a parody of modern lives, mocking all the time, the wrongly chosen adventuresome dreams for reality. His *Angel City* is filled with "Cripples and lames.....they come and go" (36). Having no correctness version and uniformity of thought. All the characters are blind folded in a dark world in which they simply quarrel with each other without a solution. Their vision is terribly limited, as a result of which, they take the Ocean to be a place of gold. The cosmic image of Ocean brings forth ideas of beauty and majesty, but in *Angel City* the Ocean is subjected to materials exploitation in which the evil-tongued monsters, the men discover gold, pearl and oil, making the Ocean empty and saline. Miss Scoons says that "the ambition behind the urge to create no difficult from any other ambition. To kill, to win. To get on top" (31). This is something Shepard seems to negate. The creative is that which is related to good feeling and this goodness has cosmic presence. Shepard's theme in *Angel City* is power which he works out through the background of movies and their most powerful influence on our imagination and lives. Here, we note a conflict between the genuine ambition of the artist and the ambition for power. The artistic vision is a cosmic one independent of the worldly vices and earthly attachments. The artist enjoys total freedom so as to create a work of art, alluring, enduring and projecting something new to the world. But, instead, the Los Angeles which Shepard describes in the play "is an accurate image born of American dreams, nurtured by drive-ins, gang-wars, carhops, and sci-fi-flicks" (Rosen, 39).

In *Angel City*, the American dream centres around the Hollywood film industry. A group of Americans consisting of film producers, actors directors, musicians, exercise their trial and vision to belong to the contemporary competitive American society and commerce. They venture to challenge the unpromising atmosphere of the country with Hollywood myth. But the Hollywood myth fails to hold the central vision of humanity due to an imaginative estimation and the disease of the screen. As J. Arun comments ; "...Shepard's *Angel City* is about the "ultimate disaster", socialization process of Hollywood .Through Shepard's powerful mixture of lyricism , theatrically, music and myth, the play becomes a bitter comic condemnation of Los Angeles, physical and symbolic 'Smog' created by the big business of movie industry.(pp 415-16).

Like a witch-doctor and like a Shaman, Shepard, through his *Angel City*, has tried to cure the modern illness, the Hollywood Mania. The Play has a dream like structure and its characters continually slip in and out of dream states and fantasy. The desire and vision are utterly contained in a one-dimensional university. The characters themselves are confined to one space, the "great office" of a Hollywood studio that is hermetically sealed. The only reference to a world beyond this space is suggested by the "large suspended blue neon rectangle with empty space in the middle" (A.C.etc.7). This suggests a screen, the place where dreams and wishes are represented .Miss Scoons's "I look at the screen and the Screen" (21), suggests that the Cinematic Screen reflects and contains the locus of desire.

Hunted by such a desire the of the play want to make something new armed with the weapons of falsity, deception and fake objects. These people are misguided, having no idea of the demands of time and culture. In trying to make wonders, they fall into the pit dug by them. By this , they deceive nobody except themselves .They attempt to influence the Mass-Media by Hollywood's false values repudiating the time-honoured concepts of truthfulness and innocence. The following conversation between Rabbit and Tympani is an evidence of it:

RABBIT: You are always standing?

TYMPANI: Always. Waiting for it to happen.

RABBIT: What “it”?

TYMPANI: “It”.

RABBIT: Oh. “It”.

TYMPANI: The rhythm. The one special, never-before-heard-before rhythm which will drive men crazy (22).

As Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* describes to his mother, his own precarious condition: “Yes opium dens, of vice and criminals hangouts, Mother, I’ve joined the Hogan gang. I am hired assassin. I carry a tommy gun in a violin case: I run a string of cut houses in the valley: They call me killer, killer Wing-field. I am leading a double life, a simple, honest ware house worker by day, by night a dynamic Czar of the under-world...” (252).

And as Yank in O’Neill’s *The hairy Ape* ironically assesses himself: “I belong and he he don’t . He’s dead but I’m living. Listen to me. Sure I’m part of de engines...I ’m de end, I’m de start. I start some’s and de world moves...And I’m what make iron in to Steel. Steel, dat stands for de whole thing...” (16-17)

Likewise, in Shepard’s *Angel City*, we find the same tone in Wheeler, the studio owner, who speaks like Tom and Yank showing his ability but deceiving himself. He cries out all others in the Studio.

RABBIT: I was trying to receive the problem from spiritual angle.

WHEELER: (standing again 0 What Problem? What spirit for! For God’s Sake. Isn’t anyone going to tell me what’s happened here? Don’t you think I’ve noticed (43)?

In another dialogue of his, the Wheeler’s audacity is very much explicit:

WHEELER: (To Rabbit) I’ll show you who is dead (63).

Thus the cosmos of Shepard has been contaminated with personal vices of the characters without the greatness of .Though the characters deplore their fall from grace, they feel quite helpless, being victimised by pride, possession of power, and a false show of honour.

However, all the characters in the play have fantasies which are in one way or another structured by movies Wheeler r ultimately desires immortality conferred by the charismatic image of film: “I’M IMMORTAL:I ‘LL ALWAYS BE REMEMBERED!” He shouts at Rabbit: “Right now there’s people all around me; watching and remembering”(52). Lanx secretly wants to be a famous boxer who is sought after by the media and who does on-screen interview. Rabbit is “ravenous for power”—the power of the “vision of a celluloid tape with a series of moving images” (12). Tympani’s fantasy to win a dinner is shaped by nostalgic images of television and film; “One dinner. Basically green pale walls. Chrome stools with black leatherette Seats. Everyone’s face is reflected in those stools” (33).Desire is always is “mediated” , shaped and constructed by filmic fantasy. Though films provoke a regression into fantasy and dream, they also become the very content of dream and desire. As Leonard Wilcox observes:

The play seems to affirm some underground realm of desire, some primal recesses of fantasy untouched by the media. Shepard seems to suggest that films appeal to a primal level of dream and instinctual Id.-forces-even to a deep “Freudian” desire to merge with the materials principle or with death itself (69).

In one of the disjunctive moments in the play, when characters suddenly speak “out of characters”, Tympani “stands on the chair facing front and shouts like a little kid to his mother upstairs”: I just wanna go to the movies, Ma! I don’t care about anything else! Just the movies! I don’t care about

school or homework or college or jobs or marriage or kids or insurance front lawns or mortgage or even the light of day! I don't care if I never see the sun against, Ma! Just send me to the dark, dark movies (24)

Wheeler is very much confident of their achievements. His vision is strong against any impossibility. For him, "curiously breeds invention"(38) Miss Scoons the realist feels, "the ambition to transform valleys into cities" (32). Rabbit expects to, "come up with a character that nobody's even seen before"(20). But their high expectations are not supported by the City. Their dream for building castle with Hollywood myth is not sanctioned by the City. They are only dream dreamers for a dream's sake, whereas the situation demands to be practical and an ever-winning athlete. Wheeler so realizes that they are being eaten up by the City, which is turning them poisonous like snake. For the sake of nursing the demand of modern life, the world permits all the artists to turn "in to snake" (40). Art has been poisoned and the free value of art remains unrealised by mankind. Rabbit feels that the modern art-making is a disease:

RABBIT: I mean you v'e got all of us turning ourselves inside out for you, but nobody really knows what is you are suffering from .

WHEELER: that is my business.

RABBIT: It is no business! It's a disease (42)

With the death of old myth the diseased myth doesn't bring about the prosperity, on the other hand, the adversity. Miss Scoons well realises the outcome of their endeavours:

MISS SCOONS:None of has got a thing. We're only going in circles, we're going in and around, we're only getting nowhere fast (30). That is why, the city is dead. All the living beings are the replacements for the dead. Such reality makes Rabbit exhausted. He says:

RABBIT: I'm exhausted. I can't keep up with this. I'm just going to look out the window for a while. May be something will come to me..... (41).

Likely after being completely disgusted, Wheeler, looking up to the cosmos but not following the real significance of it, and speaks out in an unhappy tone:

WHEELER: ".....The Moon raced across the sky. The planets howled performed a conversation in empty space"(50)

But, how can the Moon have a racing power, when it lacks illumination, and how can the planets howl in space when they are totally powerless and depend upon the Sun for the power of illumination? However, Tympani gives a good answer: "This earth is a place of trouble and death where deranged citizen rule" (28). Hence, in the cosmos of Shepard, we smell only hell in which junkies live a care-free life with all kinds of dopes and drugs. The Angel City is clearly transformed into hell, where all the characters lead the lives of emptiness, derangement and endless agony. Finally, "The city thunders with the hollow moon of despair" (16). The long nourished vision of the inhabitants is broken. The play concludes with the apocalyptic vision. Wheeler yet expects, "Anything is possible here" (46).

Shouting at Rabbit, he says, "I'm established: I'm in the business. I'm in pictures. I plant pictures in people's heads" (52). He makes his ambitions clear: "It is going to open up the world. It is going to get me out of here"(53).

But, the banality of Hollywood film engulfs the play's world as characters are engulfed by the green slime that oozes from Rabbit's machine bundles. The world of the play is turned inside out: everything becomes filmic representations. The primary space the characters inhabit is transformed into the cinematic screen, as Lanx and Miss Scoons take their positions onstage, eat imaginary popcorn, and

impassively watch the “on-screen “ action between Wheeler and Rabbit. Wheeler tries frantically to communicate with them, but as Rabbit tells him, “All they’re looking at is a moving picture show” (52) . Then in another dramatic shift, filmic representation encompasses the entire fictional world of the play as Miss Scoons and Lanx themselves become actors in a movie, mounting the script of a 1950s teenage “Juvenile delingnant” film:

MISS SCOONS: (To Lanx) I’m not supposed to stay for the second one Ya’ know , Jimmy.

LANX: Yeah , yeah.

MISS SCOONS: Well, I’m supposed to be back before eleven.

LANX: I’m just wanna stay for the titles.

MISS SCOONS: Last time you said that we never get back until, there in the morning.

LANX: That was last time.

MISS SCOONS; I almost got sent to juvie.

I don’t wanna ‘got sent to juvie.

LANX: Relax, will Ya’ . You’re gonna get sent to juvie, for Christ’s sake. I just wanna’ see the titles (53-54)

The play is thus a kind of self-annihilating Mobius strip where we completely witness the fragmented vision and its apocalypse is the text culminating in an enactment of its own obliteration.

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