CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

It seems to be a strange paradox that in the present age of high technological innovations, which has seen the development of the most sophisticated, elaborate and extensive means of communication, man is at heart anxious about his failure to communicate sincerely with his fellow beings. Desperate at heart he realizes that the glass of language is flawed and as man looks through it back into the present, his view is distorted and blurred. Individually and collectively, he is linguistically maladjusted. Not understanding himself, he fails to understand others. Such misunderstanding may lead to fears, anxieties, conflicts and disasters which might have been lessened or prevented if man were able to communicate properly. (Thurman ed., *Semantics* viii)

This communication crisis is manifested in almost all levels of human interaction, particularly after the Second World War. Acknowledging the existence of such a crisis, this study has been an attempt to analyze and examine how post-Second World War playwrights, especially the American playwrights Sam Shepard and David Mamet, have responded to this issue.
Dramatists like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee have all sought to rely upon "silence" in their theatre. They consider theatre, which is a "nonverbal, non-anthropomorphic mode of communication neither bound or fragmented by time" (Kane 179) to be the perfect medium to record the multiplicity of human responses. These dramatists, observes Kane, "have rejected speech and employed silence to evaluate or censure an act, to indicate manipulative relationships, to increase or release tension, and to emphasize the significance of particular words" (179). Pinter maintains that in a world characterized by doubt one can only say with certainty that "the more acute the experience the less articulate its expression" (qtd. in Kane 180).

What these playwrights find more challenging is how to speak about the unspeakable, that is the dehumanizing, disintegrating experiences confronted by the individuals living in an estranged and disoriented universe. Beckett suggests that this essential inexplicability, the chaos of experience, exerts increased demands on artistic form:

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no more form in art. It only means that there will be a new form, and this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. This is why the form itself becomes a
pre-occupation because it exists as a problem separate from
the material it accommodates. (qtd. in Kane 180).

The quest for a new form of drama that is adequate to reflect the
contemporary dilemma, that is, the agony and anxiety of non-
communication, have paved way to numerous innovations in the language,
as well as techniques used in drama. Corrigan reminds us of the significant
role that theatre has to play in contemporary life.

Theatre must express the senselessness and irrationality of all
human actions. The theatre must confront audience with that
sense of isolation—the sense of man’s being encircled in a void—
which is an irremediable part of the human condition. In such a
universe, communication with others is almost impossible, and
the language of these plays is symptomatic of their author’s
belief in man’s inability to communicate and express his basic
thoughts and feelings. (“Introduction” 11)

Corruption and moral disintegration that has crept into the
contemporary American society has denied its inhabitants the ability to
communicate effectively and sincerely. Language no longer serves to bind
people together but only aggravates their mutual aloofness. The plays of
Mamet and Shepard highlight this tension between man and his socio-
cultural environment, and lead to the recognition of individual isolation and
the need for effective communication. They originate from a strong sense of loss— a feeling that the cultural values of America are no longer adequate for emotional survival. “The psychic scenery is bleak; the ground level from which almost all of Shepard’s drama grows is the worn-out poisoned soil of contemporary American culture” (Patraka 13). “We sense in his works,” remarks Oumano “intimations of a vague longing, a sense of something missing and missed” (4). Roudane in his essay on Mamet’s mimetics makes a remarkable observation:

At the centre of Mamet’s moral vision lies an amoral universe, a postmodernist American view of Nature spotlighting our organic disconnection from the historical, cultural and mythic resonance of the past. (5)

Shepard, in his plays combines the mythic and geographic landscapes of America with the debris of modern consumerism and expresses concern over the common man’s failure to “make a home in the contemporary wilderness” (Coe. “Image Shots are Blown” 57). The American culture has become so bankrupt that it can no longer hold up the traditional values and norms that it had once cherished. Cherry, a character in Shepard’s Shaved Splits expresses her disgust at the contemporary American society’s ideology of self-interest and personal comfort, which breeds alienation and non communication.
This is a fucked up country . . . A schizophrenic country. Split right up the middle. It's never gotten together and it never will. Thing is you gotta make sense out of all the chaos or else you're up shit creek. Right?. You gotta make yourself a personal world where things work the way they're supposed to. Where you're comfy and warm. (The Unseen Hand and Other Plays 171).

Frederic Jameson's description of contemporary American society closely resembles the one that Shepard and Mamet have visualized through their plays. Jameson states:

At some point following World War II a new kind of society began to emerge (variously described as postindustrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, media society and so forth). New types of consumption: planned obsolescence, and even more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes: the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, center and province, by the suburb and the universal standardization; the growth of the great network of super highways and the arrival of the automobile culture— these are
some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break with that older prewar society. (qtd. in De Rose 3)

The sudden destruction of the traditional agrarian way of life, following the industrial boom, has adversely affected the socio-economic structure of America. It has shattered the personal as well as the cultural mythology of the common man. Shepard has remarked that many of his plays “center around a character in a critical state of consciousness. I like to operate off that dynamic” (Weiner 14). His plays abound in figures from American film, popular culture and folklore, who experience the conflict between their spiritual and cultural heritage and the empty high-tech simulations of life that constitute modern civilization.

Shepard deliberately deviates from the track of conventional realism. Right from the days of his early experiments at playwrighting he has sought a form to give expression to the fragmented images that gleam in his imagination. He admits that his plays are “risky” for “if there’s no risk, there’s no experiment” (qtd. in Hart 111) and such daring experimentations make his plays challenging. Orr uses the term “shock dramaturgy” (Tragic Drama and Modern Society 243) to characterize Shepard’s method of leaving the dramatic action “open ended” without a clear cut resolution or finality. He refuses to impose a form or enforce closure. “A resolution isn’t an ending,” he says. “it’s a strangulation” (qtd. in Hart 111).
Shepard's plays portray a paranoid world where "the self fears the other, the inner soul fears the outer persona, and where amidst total chaos, the 'unseen hand' is at the back of everything" (Orr, Tragicomedy and Contemporary Culture 110). Plays like Curse of the Starving Class, True West, Buried Child and Fool for Love portray families on the verge of disintegration, whose members are in some way "excluded or displaced, bemused and bewildered, desperate and paranoid" (Orr 113). These as well as his early plays like La Turista, Operation Sidewinder, Chicago, Red Cross and so on abound in apocalyptic images that offer bleak, depressing and disappointing expectations about the future world. In these plays the dialogue, the language as well as the staging tend to create an overwhelming sense of mental and physical disorientation. In La Turista Kent experiences severe communication problems in the alien country Mexico. His distress is demonstrated through the fragmented structure of the play and the sudden shifts in character and situation. Similarly Blue Bitch and Geography of a Horse Dreamer portray the intense mental agitation experienced by an individual when he is separated from his native environment. Cody the artistic cowboy genius in Geography of a Horse Dreamer, who has the power to dream and predict the outcome of horse races is kidnapped from his native Wyoming by commercial entrepreneurship and forced into slavery. But Cody's natural talent has faded because he has been uprooted from his natural surroundings and kept in isolation in a foreign country. Fingers, the
boss, ignorant of the fact that Cody’s gift arises from his keen sensitivity to his environment, keeps him locked. Cody undergoes several transformations in this stage of acute psychic discomfort. He transforms himself first into a dog breeder, then into a trainer and finally into a dog, whimpering and scurrying away from others, “crashing into things like a frightened animal” (Geography of a Horse Dreamer 118). Shepard thus rejects conventional notions of a well-formed character in favour of figures who cannot be defined precisely in psychological and social terms.

In Shepard’s theatre family life is violent and contradictory, and is shaped by long suppressed forces and dark secrets. The family is “one that cannot nurture its children, that has become as fruitless and sterile as the betrayed American dream of the West” (Auerbach 54). The central image developed in each play is one of separation and incommunicability. Women, occupy a relatively subordinate position in most of Shepard’s plays. His mother figures are too weak to counteract the violence of the fathers. Quite often they hopelessly fail to restore order in the familial world which is on the verge of disintegration. His father figures are usually vagabonds who shun the responsibility of bringing up a family. They blissfully escape into the desert or wilderness to meet their own selfish ends. Baylor, the cruel father in A Lie of the Mind is a typical representative of Shepard’s father figures. His contempt towards women is clearly evident in his speech:
I could be up in the wild country, huntin’ antelope. I could be raising a string of pack-mules up in there. Doin’ something useful. But no, I gotta play nursemaid to a bunch a’ feeble-minded women down there in civilization who can’t take care of themselves. I gotta waste my days away makin’ sure they eat and have a roof over their heads. (*A Lie of the Mind* 107)

Meg, his wife, has been completely worn out by the emotional brutality of her husband. Her talk betrays the helplessness and lack of power she experiences in her relationship with him.

Meg: The female – the female one needs – the other.

Baylor: What other?

Meg: The male. The male one.

Baylor: Oh.

Meg: But the male one doesn’t really need the other. Not the same way.

Baylor: I don’t get ya.

Meg: The male one goes off by himself. Leaves. He needs something else. But he doesn’t know what it is. He doesn’t really know what he needs. So he ends up dead. By himself. (105)

*In Buried Child* and *Fool for Love* the longing for a healthy family has been proscribed by the breaking of the incest taboo. *Beth and Frankie in*
*A Lie of the Mind* are victims of the violence of their father and have seen the helplessness of their mother to protect them. Shepard intensifies the complexities inherent in the familial relationships through certain powerful visual images. The repeated motif of bodies cocooned in bed, of Beth, Jake, Sally and Lorraine, help to intensify the claustrophobic sensation among the characters as well as the insecurity they experience due to lack of proper communication. Images of injury are also evident in the play. The initial shocking image of Beth’s battered figure in the hospital bed is followed by several other images of injury undergone by the characters. Baylor’s feet are cracked with frostbite, Frankie has a bullet wound in his leg. Beth shows an imagined lobotomy scar, Mike carries the wounded hindquarters of a dead deer, Jake appears with bleeding hands and knees. Sally gives a macabre description of the death of her drunken father “splattered all over the road like some lost piece of livestock” (*A Lie of the Mind* 95).

A sense of aloofness from other people, from a rooted surrounding, from one’s own self is the central concern of Shepard whose plays explore the American psyche at a time of failed dreams and lost visions. A character in his play *Simpatico* utters in deep frustration: “I’ve changed my name . . . and nothing came out of it. I’ve moved all over the place. I was in Texas for a while . . . Arizona. Nothing came from any of it. I’ve just got further and further removed” (qtd. in Bigsby, “Ballad of a Sad Society” 12).
Henry Hackamore, another character in the play *Seduced* speaks of a vision, which expresses the intensity of his loneliness:

> It's the same thing I saw in Taxes when I was a boy. The same thing I've always seen. I saw myself. Alone. Standing in open country. Primitive. Screaming with hostility toward men. Toward us. Toward me. As though men didn't belong there. As though men were a joke in the face of it . . . And far off, invisible little men were huddled against it in cities. In tiny towns. In organizations. Protected. I saw the whole world of men as pathetic. Sad, demented little morons moving in circles . . . Always in the same circles. Always away from truth. Getting smaller and smaller until they finally disappeared. (111)

Visual suggestions exercise tremendous power in a Shepard play. The visual image is central to Shepard's theatricality and he has said that he is interested in writing plays through attitudes, derived from other forms such as music, painting, sculpture, film and the like. More crucial is his remark that he starts writing a play from a picture in his mind: "I would have like a picture, and just start from there. A picture of a guy in a bathtub, or of two guys on stage with a sign blinking - you know, things like that" ("Metaphors" 191).

Marinet also portrays a world that is bleak, where marriages collapse, families disintegrate and traditional values and morals are no longer held
high. The lives that he dramatizes are themselves without plot, without direction, purpose or transcendence. Unlike Shepard, Mamet seldom makes use of images or symbols in his plays. The strength of his theatre lies in his language. David Skeele considers Mamet as a "keen social critic who uses the groping inarticulateness and dizzying verbal constructions of his characters to form a chorus of complaint against the spiritual emptiness at the core of America" (512).

Mamet, like Shepard, also shocks his audience through his blunt and savage language of the streets. His plays are usually set in the seamy and seedy underworld and his characters are generally low-life villains and misfits, and he deals with their base language. The America that forms the background of his works is one that is deeply troubled and divided. Robert Storey's remarks seem relevant here:

The making of Mamet's America is founded upon a verbal busyness. glib, deft, quick; the parenthetical asides that lace his dialogue (destined undoubtedly, to become as celebrated as Pinter's pauses) suggest minds that abhor verbal vacuums, that operate at all levels on the energy of language itself. (2)

Mamet's characters exist in a "debased wilderness in which morals and metaphysics seem to have no place" (Dean 86). Through his play, American Buffalo, Mamet strongly expresses his resentment at the way in which the American society has been evolving; decent moral standards no
longer appear to have any place and genuine emotions are being insidiously corrupted. "His characters, sets, and overall situations map out a predatory world . . . a world in which perhaps, only the fittest (and surely the greediest) might survive" says Roudane (27). The "junkshop" which forms the setting of *American Buffalo* "with its piles of once treasured, now rejected cultural artefacts" stands for a culturally sterile America in which "the business ethic has so infiltrated the national consciousness that traditional human values have become buried under current values of power and greed" (Schlueter 499). The play provides the meagre message that "life rotten as it is, is all we have" (qtd. in Barbera 272). In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet makes use of real-estate salesmen to expose a society built on merciless exploitation. C. Wright Mills identifies the image of the salesman with America as a nation:

The salesman's world has now become everybody's world, and, in some part, everybody has become a salesman . . . This is a time of venality . . . The bargaining manner, the huckstering animus, the memorize theology of pep, the commercialized evaluation of personal traits — they are all around us: in public and in private there's the tang and feel of salesmanship. (qtd. in Schvey 102)
The playwright himself has commented on *Glengarry Glen Ross*. “To me the play is about a society with only one bottom line: how much money you make” (Gussow, “Real Estate World” 19).

Mamet’s characters speak a language that reflects the cultural abyss into which their country has fallen. They have become emotionally dessicated in their struggle to survive in a society that no longer binds them together. Mamet himself has stated that “what I write about is what I think is missing from our society. And that’s communication on a basic level” (qtd. in Dean 33).

Divorce, remarriage and broken families are indeed a recognizable American phenomenon. Mamet’s plays, like Shepard’s, also expose the alienation generated by urban life, the flexibility of human relationships, as well as the decay of a language expressive of genuine human needs. Filial relationships are reduced to mere transactions and expressions of “power” and this might be the reason why Mamet has deliberately avoided writing a family play. The nature of man-woman relationships exposed in *The Woods, Reunion* and *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, are thoroughly pessimistic. The characters are all incomplete in one way or the other, and more painfully, they are vaguely aware of that incompleteness. They struggle to fill the spaces in their lives with fantasies. Even the language they use serves only to distance them from one another. Bigsby observes:
It is with great precision that Mamet reproduces the dislocation, the vacuity, the desperate strategies of those people who are aware of some insufficiency in their lives but seemingly have access to no language with which they may fully express it, no action which can assuage it, no sense of transcendence which may serve to neutralize it. (David Mamet 130-131)

Modern American drama and theatre have long been major forces in the attempt to define the nature of the American experience. The provocative and often controversial attempts of the writers to dramatize their observations have provided insights into the complexities and ambiguities of contemporary American life. American drama and theatre needs distinct, ruthless visions like those of Mamet and Shepard to shock the audiences from their life-sleep, from their numbing complacency that would allow them to survive the nation's spiritual decay.