Preface

Communication crisis is a universal phenomenon in the post-Second World War era, popularly acclaimed as the postmodern age. The present study, prompted by this conviction, has endeavoured to examine and analyse the dramatic works of Sam Shepard and David Mamet, two of the most significant and powerful voices in contemporary American drama and theatre. The thesis examines in detail how these playwrights, through their subtle combinations of dramatic techniques, themes as well as language have probed into this grave problem and explicated it through their plays.

The loss of communication, the failure to communicate sincerely and effectively, and the accompanying feeling of alienation and disorientation are conveyed dramatically through the resources of the text and the stage and through the synchronized speech movements and setting of the dramatic spectacle. A well-developed plot akin to the conventional model has lost its relevance in the plays of Shepard and Mamet. The major themes that dominate the plays being a sense of loss, alienation and fragmentation of the individual, the plot loses its linear structure and continuity. The failure of communication, or rather the problems inherent in effective communication between individuals belonging to a family, or even a particular group, are communicated by highlighting the alienated and fragmented existence of the characters in the plays.

What is undertaken in these pages is a textual analysis of selected plays of these writers rather than a performance-based study. A viewing of the live performance of these plays obviously is not possible for an Indian student
working in a suburban institution. However, I don't consider this as a shortcoming, as textual analyses are capable of producing results, which may not always come from performance-based research.

The thesis is organized in the form of five chapters including an introduction and a conclusion. The introductory chapter provides a brief discussion of the communicative pathos experienced in the contemporary world and of how post-war literature, especially American drama, has responded to this problem.

The second chapter is devoted to the major techniques employed by these two playwrights to illuminate the communication crisis. Shepard excels Mamet in his exuberant use of dramatic techniques and stage devices. His plays are a conglomeration of colours, sounds and music. He makes use of various images and surrealistic as well as supra-realistic techniques in plays like *The Rock Garden, Action, Buried Child, La Tursita, Fool for Love, Operation Sidewinder, Curse of the Starving Class, Icarus’ Mother* and *True West* which are discussed with illustrations from each play. Both Shepard and Mamet resort to story telling and soliloquizing - two significant techniques that they have put to use in a judicious manner in their plays. The concept of metatheatre as manifested in their plays is also highlighted.

The third chapter analyses the major themes that are worked out by the two dramatists. It tries to point out that the narcissistic culture that has been spreading in America during the late 1960s, has resulted in the formation of a
society in which survival has become the major concern. People no longer care for their posterity, but live in the present. This has to a great extent resulted in the alienation and fragmentation of the individual, which aggrevates communication failure both in the private and public spheres of life.

The fourth chapter probes into the treatment of language by Shepard and Mamet. It discusses how language is being thoroughly manipulated by men to the extent that it loses its warmth and tenderness and transforms itself into a weapon of violence and power. The question of language and its relation to power and the several ways in which it interrupts and hinders the process of effective communication between individuals is examined. The playwrights excel in the use of an attenuated and debased language to expose the iniquitous social system and to dramatize the injustices inherent in modern urban society. Their use of long pauses, repetitions, silences and disjunctive speech patterns are also analysed.

The concluding chapter sums up the contributions of Shepard and Mamet, placing them in the context of post-war American drama.

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