Chapter Six
Conclusion

With innumerable variations in time and in space, masculinity is more complicated than we might first believe and, consequently, masculinity can be studied not as a single definition, but as variety and complexity.

REESER

Sam Shepard Rogers—a prolific and hugely successful playwright as well as film actor, screenwriter, and film director—has gained wide recognition during the 1970s and afterwards until now. He is widely regarded as the leading American avant-garde and postmodernist playwright of the late twentieth century. “He has been called both ‘the greatest American playwright of his generation’ and ‘the thinking woman’s beefcake’ (Shewey 3). His first play, Cowboys (1964), was followed by a stream of plays most of which were produced in New York in off- and off-off-Broadway theatres. Shepard’s status as an experimental artist is indisputable. Saddik in her book Contemporary American Drama very competently goes over the main points of Shepard’s artistic writing:

In several of his experimental plays characterised by condensed and fragmented dialogue, highly symbolic language, and characters lifted from the mythic discourses of Hollywood film, rock ‘n’ roll or literature, Shepard is concerned with the postmodern question of essence versus appearance and the slipperiness of ‘authentic’ identity as it relates to image, particularly the image associated with artistic fame. Yet while his characters crave the stability of a fixed core identity and a return to origins, the inevitable contradiction is that they ultimately realise that freedom is possible only through fluidity, instability, movement. They must, therefore, remain fugitives and surge forward, never resting, despite their desperate, romantic need to cling to an unattainable ideal, a core of Truth.
Stasis signifies death or confinement (a kind of death), and freedom lies in flexibility and individual agency, the ability to mould image(s) of the self and remain in process. (Saddik 130-31)

Shepard’s plays are about individuals’ attempt to achieve or exert power over one another. His plays demonstrate that power and dominance are central principles in American culture. So Shepard integrates the “essential struggle for dominance with cultural icons of power: mythic figures, material objects, historical characters, and social and cultural institutions” (Baechler and Litz 431). Shepard’s plays are always peopled with “heroic figures from the myths of popular culture: cowboys and rock stars, detectives and jazzmen, killers and dreamers” (Shewey 3).

Generally, Shepard’s work has received largely enthusiastic reviews, although critics have at times had difficulty clearly delineating the merits of his unconventional methods. Most of Shepard’s plays are recognized as part of the postmodern departure from traditional literary modes. Critics have frequently granted Shepard a pivotal role in contemporary American theater, applauding his ability to create accessible dramas while pioneering nontraditional techniques.

This study has questioningly looked at the notion of masculinity as it has been constructed in Western culture, focusing on the construction of male identity in Shepard’s plays. Through gender studies this project has explored the different meanings attached to masculinity and the attitude of Shepard toward this issue.

The inferences drawn from the argument of the preceding chapters demonstrate that generally Shepard is more concerned with the psyche and identity of his male characters than his female characters. Through critical analysis of male gender and sexuality it is shown how male gender experiences change in different social and cultural periods. The field of masculinity studies offers a particular range of ideas and theories to his works’ analysis.

The importance of male identity and experience has been displayed by some contemporary playwrights such as Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams and Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) as leading forefathers who have portrayed a common concern with male
subjectivity. In their works they have attempted to represent how male characters struggle to assert their manhood or masculine identity. In addition to these playwrights there are other contemporary dramatists who deal with male subjectivity very seriously. The most known are David Mamet (1947-), David Rabe (1940-) and African American August Wilson (1945-) who have shown much interest in male subjects. To the list of the playwrights who show interest in male identity we can add Tony Kushner and Chinese-American David Henry Hwang. Being obsessed with male identity and experience, Shepard acquires a unique and special place amongst his contemporary playwrights who are involved with the issue of masculinity.

From analytical reading of Sam Shepard’s selected plays: The Tooth of Crime (1972), Buried Child (1978), Fool for Love (1983), States of Shock (1991), Simpatico (1994), and The Late Henry Moss (2000) it is inferred that he treats the idea of masculinity in a very special way. In his plays he exhibits almost all configurations of masculinity, namely, hegemonic, subordinate, effeminate, emasculated, and female or non-male masculinity as well as crisis of masculinity, and traditional/de-traditional masculinity.

Shepard’s early plays establish his interest in male individuation, especially in regard to the father/son conflict. Sons in Shepard’s plays never escape the father’s legacy, even after the father’s death, because they have learned and inherited patriarchal ideas of violent masculinity from their fathers. Part of the identity process for men in Shepard’s early plays is to gain power, authority, and self-esteem through the abuse of individuals around them especially women. This violence and abuse is a by-product of the male quest for identity. Because Shepard’s characters lack the ability to relate their feelings, wants, needs, and fears to their family and peers, they act violently to appear tough and in control. The destructive nature of masculine identity is a result of men not knowing themselves, and therefore modeling the behavior of generations of violent men who value the domination, masculinity, and physicality of the Old West. If these early plays portray men as stereotyped figures of the traditional macho male who is aggressive, violent and dominant in position, these plays feature women as archetypal sex objects, which facilitate the definition of maleness. Women are objects which are needed to give dominant status to male characters.
Shepard’s earlier plays exhibit aggression and the characteristics of Western manhood. The analysis of Shepard’s major rock play The Tooth of Crime (1972) shows that dominative hegemonic masculinity has not an essential core. It is unstable and acts only as a performance. In addition, violence and aggression are accepted as defining features and natural parts of hegemonic masculinity. In The Tooth of Crime, conspicuous violence and aggression are communicated through masculine actions, language and music. Chauvinism, violence, aggression, and toughness both mental and physical as defining characteristics of hegemonic masculinity emerge from the social and cultural settings. Hegemonic masculinity acts also as a kind of discourse. Like all other discourses, dominant hegemonic masculinity is subject to change. In The Tooth of Crime, the traditional discourse and modern one are staged in dialogue with each other as different discourses of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, it is concluded that hegemonic masculinity acts as an ideology. It is shaped and constructed through Ideological State Apparatuses such as arts, and media. These institutions produce ideologies and individuals internalize them and act accordingly. Western films, rock and roll and jazz music, and the drug- and media-obsessed culture influence and shape male subjectivity. The consequences of the influence of popular culture and media as creating systems of ideas and values are very clear and remarkable in The Tooth of Crime.

The plays coming after the early phase of Shepard’s writing also focus on the problematics of masculinity. Family plays: Curse of the Starving Class (1977), Buried Child (1978), True West (1980), Fool for Love (1983), A Lie of the Mind (1985), and the latest plays States of Shock (1991), Simpatico (1994), and Eyes for Consuela (1998), are prominent examples which show Shepard’s interest to portray male psyche and male subjectivity.

There is a shift of focus in Shepard’s family plays, namely, Buried Child (1978) and Fool for Love (1983). These works portray the dangers of relying exclusively on violence and chauvinism as a definition of self. Male aggression and violence continues to be depicted in these plays in a milder degree. Embarrassment and anxiety of the male characters is caused because of adhering on some level to traditional masculinity while at the same time avoiding violence, aggression and abuse of women. Men must retain certain masculine attributes, but at the same time, they must not violently stifle female voices. Female characters are given voice to express their thoughts and
emotions. Through obtaining masculine traits and power, women transcend female territory so that men become dependent on them at times. These plays very artistically depict emasculation, effeminacy, and female masculinity as configurations of masculinity. Effeminate masculinity signifies that the identity of male subjects is constructed through appropriating traits which are opposing to masculinity, especially those which are recognized as womanlike and feminine. Effeminacy and emasculation should not be taken synonymous. Emasculation designates depriving men of their strength, vigor, power, force, and finally their authority. Through emasculation male individual becomes weakened, humiliated and disarmed since he loses power and authority. The fact that defining features of hegemonic masculinity such as power, strength, toughness or violence are not confined to the body of male individuals is shown through non-male or female masculinity. Female masculinity empowers women to move into the masculine territory which was always occupied by men and get dominance. Female masculinity brings anxiety for macho men making them worried about the loss of their dominant masculine status.

Anthony Giddens’ thesis of *Crisis of Masculinity* describes that under the impact of globalization in advanced industrial societies the way male subjects construct and shape their identities has changed radically. Social and cultural changes result in changing social status of men and crisis of masculinity. With the loss of their traditional roles in the family and workplace, modern men become dazed about their position in the family and society. They are caught between traditional conditioning and contemporary demands and cannot match entirely with either. Shepard’s plays from 1990 onwards expose that manhood is in crisis. They demonstrate an outlook that distinguishes them from Shepard’s earlier works. A detailed analysis of the three plays Sam Shepard has written during and after 1990: *States of Shock* (1991), *Simpatico* (1994), and *The Late Henry Moss* (2000) displays a shift in his focus. In these plays most emphasis is put on the crisis of masculinity and male/male relationship.

In the 1990s, Shepard’s interest seemed to shift somewhat from male-female relationships to that between men, whether it was the baffled couple in his film *Far North*, aware of their redundancy because a shift in the system of power that has left them stranded, or the surreal pair in *States of Shock*, Shepard’s response to the Gulf War, who are traumatized, by turns truculent and bewildered. In *Simpatico*, likewise, first staged in
1995, he explores the relationship between two men, yoked together by crime, yet hostile to one another, a mock marriage in which, as in *True West*, the men eventually exchange roles and identities”. (Bercovitch 62)

Shepard’s plays dating from 1990 onwards mostly examine: male/male relationship; American family; father/son conflict; crisis of fatherhood; sibling rivalry; balanced male; male/female relationship; none-male masculinity; feminized masculinity; female transcendence over men; the quest for love and personal identity; and finally political or personal war which results in the de-mythologized image of war hero as the American manhood.

Briefly speaking, Shepard’s work falls into three phases. His early period of writing which encompasses the years between 60s to mid 70s best portray macho male-dominated world in which male protagonists struggle to gain dominant hegemonic masculinity and are considered to be stereotyped figures of traditional masculinity. In the middle period of his career covering the years from mid 70s to late 80s, he puts an emphasis on none-male masculinity, de-traditionalized manhood, effeminacy, and emasculation which weaken male subjects. Indeed, Shepard’s long-held interest in male aggression, violence, and sexual conquest runs counter to the tenderness and sensibility celebrated in these works. Plays written in the final decade of the 20th century and the first decade of 21st century are important for portraying the crisis male characters confront within more advanced societies. In these plays it is shown that manliness seen as strong and dominant in traditional societies has disappeared. Dislocated from tradition, men’s lifestyle has changed and they have remained dazed and confused about their new status. In this situation crisis seems inevitable.