

# Tale of Loss & Personal Ruin in Response to Time of Crisis in Selected Plays by Christopher Shinn & Jon Robin Baitz

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## Abstract

*Dying City* by Christopher Shinn, an American playwright, premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London 2006. *Other Desert Cities* by Jon Robin Baitz, also an American playwright, premiered at Off-Broadway in January 2011. Both plays deal with Iraqi war in apolitical way. However, *Dying City* puts into focus conflicting identities as a result of social and political context that threatens individuals' agency and concepts about themselves. Meanwhile, *Other Desert Cities* investigates domineering paternal relationships that produce passive/docile subjects. This study demonstrates that individuals' agency and identity could be affected by domination relationship, limiting individuals' choices and eliciting rebellion. This is undertaken by investigating characters' ability to resist hegemonic relationships and endure controversial war debate. Characters' subordination and resistance are also discussed. However, Shinn and Baitz's aims are not to deal with the war but to underline its influence on personal relationships.

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**Keywords:** Agency, identity, relationships, domination, resistance.

## 1- Introduction:

*Dying City* by Christopher Shinn premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in London 2006. Ben Brantley suggests, "The title's reference is to Baghdad, but it could just as well be New York" (n. pag. 2007). The play tells the story of two twin brothers. Peter begins a journey of discovery to investigate the suspicious death of his twin brother, Craig, who died in Iraqi war. He tries to reach out to his brother's wife, Kelly, to find answers about his death. He arrives at her flat unannounced to disclose some secrets about Craig's life & death. Also, *Other Desert Cities* by Jon Robin Baitz (2011) deals with Iraqi war. It is about an American family celebrating Christmas Eve in 2004 when the elder daughter, Brooke, decides to publish a memoir about her brother

Henry who commits suicide after joining a group of terrorists who bombed an army recruiting station in US. Brooke's parents, Polly and Lyman, try to convince her not to publish the memoir which threatens to reveal Henry's fake suicide. Later, they confess that Henry is still alive somewhere in the globe, and they invented this story to get rid of the US police pursuits of Henry. The play puts into focus manifestations of paternal dominance as Polly and Lyman try to dominate their children's decisions.

This study adopts a theoretically informed approach which draws on power theory, particularly Thomas Wartenberg's theory, paying special attention to his analysis of domination relations. It also examines the meaning of agency and identity and their significance to the characters in Shinn and Baitz's plays and how losing **agency** affects the choices of the characters, using social theories about identity and agency in order to investigate characters' conflicting **identities** and control/mastery over their choices/actions. The study intends to illustrate the theoretical background of the concepts of domination, agency and identity in order to investigate the influence of domination relations on characters' true identities. This paper provides a simplified explanation of these concepts, which will suffice to explore characters' motivations and conflicts in the aforementioned plays.

## **2- Theoretical Background**

According to Peter J. Burke & Jan E. Stets, "An identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (p. 3, 2009). Individuals occupy different roles in society. Therefore, they adopt certain traits or characteristics that make them unique in performing these roles. Individuals' beliefs and behavior are influenced by these attitudes and roles in society. Since individuals are components and members of social structures/context and are involved in different social relations, they influence the society and are influenced by it. Burke & Stets add that "There is, thus, an elaborate system of mutual influences between characteristics of the individual and characteristics of society" (p. 4, 2009). However, they add that the society makes individuals and affects their identities and is influenced by their actions. Individuals depend on the society in constructing their identities. They would change if the society or social environment is changed; therefore, "identity theory assumes that identity meanings are always changing. However, the rate at which they change is generally assumed to be very slow compared to the action outputs designed to change situational meanings and provide verification" (pp. 175-176, 2009). This change is not instant. It takes time to be noticed, and it is an ongoing process.

In *Dying City & Other Desert Cities*, characters are subjugated by familial domination relations that suppress and limit their choices in life. By domination, Thomas Wartenberg refers to “the power that one social agent has over another in situations in which that power is exercised by the dominating agent over the dominated agent repeatedly, systematically, and to the detriment of the dominated agent” (p. 117, 1990). Domination is a social relation in which an individual exercises domination over the subordinate agent in order to restrict his/her options. Sometimes, these relations of domination harm the other party. For example, “it certainly is true that parents can dominate their children, especially when they think they are acting for the children’s good” (p. 120, 1990). However, Wartenberg stresses the notion of causing mischief rather than benefit to the subject in this “paternalistic relationship” as he calls it. This authoritarian relation puts individuals’ agency at risk. Agency is defined as “ a concept that is generally understood as a capacity to act or cause change” (Stephen & Karen, p. 17, 2009). Nonetheless, in domineering relations, the subject is allowed minimal space to act or choose freely.

### **3- Discussion and Analysis:**

This study explores characters’ agency and identity that could be affected by paternal domination relationship, restricting their choices and eliciting resistance and revolution. This is undertaken by demonstrating their ability to deal with and respond to time of war. Characters’ subordination and resistance are also discussed. However, Shinn and Baitz’s aims are not to deal with war but to underline the influence of war on personal relationships. This is discussed in *Dying City* by Christopher Shinn & *Other Desert Cities* by Jon Robin Baitz. Through Craig’s suicide in *Dying City* and Henry’s involvement in a terrorist attack in *Other Desert Cities*, Shinn and Baitz question current political scene and its effect on individuals’ personal life. Characters’ resistance to imposed social roles is put into focus, as they strive to act independently and adopt new identities. Resistance takes different forms; suicide as in Craig’s case, escape in Henry’s case, or revolution and resistance in Brooke’s case, as she stands against paternal domination. The resistance of the characters refers to paternal dominance that limits their freedom and imposes certain identities. In *Other Desert Cities*, Henry leaves the family and searches for a new identity of weak commitment to his parents’ imposed identity and stronger ties to terrorists. Therefore, he is expected to assume a new identity/role, affirming that there is no going back to his previous one. Similarly, Craig’s new identity is more likely to be activated in the current situation, which arouses a kind of irreconcilable conflict that leads to his fatal death, since it is more difficult to change current identity standards. In both

plays, characters do not have freedom to act or decide independently, which reflects their oppression.

*Dying City* begins after Craig's suspicious death. Peter, Craig's brother, is a gay actor who is involved in different relationships and speaks in many million directions. He acts as an inspector to find out answers about his brother's demise. He tries to keep in touch with his brother's widow, Kelly. However, she makes his mission impossible by refusing to answer his phone calls. Consequently, he suddenly shows up at the door of her house. The play reaches its climax when Peter reveals that Craig's death is not an accident; it could be a suicide. Being shocked, Kelly retrieves Craig's conduct before he goes to Iraqi war.

Craig's suicide is the driving force of *Dying City*. The play puts into focus Craig's conflicting identity. He experienced a significant transformation in his character after becoming a soldier. He assumes a new role and identity in society. His new attitude toward life influences his personality, thoughts and emotions toward his wife and life in general. After his death, Kelly goes through a shocking journey of discovery. She realizes that she barely knows him. Metaphorically, they lived in isolated islands. Craig's suicide could be the end of irreconcilable conflict between his old/real self and his new one as a volunteer soldier. In a letter to Peter, which is revealed after a year of Craig's death, he contemplates on his life and how he changes from a researcher in literature into a soldier in the army.

Craig is interested in literary studies; however, he makes a decision that does not agree with his basic identity; he becomes a veteran, making decisions that do not suit his main/ true identity. Therefore, he commits suicide as a way to revolt against his new self and that rapid change in the social context. In general, the individual experiences an inconsistent identity if he/she has more than one identity. In *Dying City*, Craig experiences this conflict as he has two incompatible personalities, one as a man who is interested in literature and the other as a man who is involved in war (his new identity). Burke & Stets suggest, "Such conflicts between two identities may come about as a person takes on new role identities" (p. 183, 2009 ) This conflict takes place because "these identities are activated at the same time and ... cannot act on the basis of one of these identities without creating a discrepancy with respect to the other, then these identities are in conflict" (p. 183, 2009). Failing to make a compromise, Craig decides to end his life to get rid of this agony, as he cannot return to his previous self, nor does he accept the new one completely.

There is a kind of miscommunication between Craig and his wife Kelly. Brought up by a rich family, she is a self-centered character. She talks a lot about her parents and patients. After her husband's death, she tries to separate herself from the past and approves of escapist attitudes. At the end of

the play, she tries to get rid of the shackles of her memories with the twins-Peter and Craig, by refusing to answer Peter's phone calls or tell him where she intends to move on. Craig's letter to his brother says it all, and proves that Kelly is the selfish side in the relationship.

There is an interesting feature about relationships among characters with each other in the play, as they struggle to dominate each others' actions, denying others' independence and agency to choose. Brantley believes, "There's not a word spoken that doesn't feed the idea of the struggle for power among people and how they try to categorize, and implicitly diminish, one another." (n. pag., 2007). The play seems like a game of power. Therefore, insurgency is expected. For example, when Kelly tries to control Craig, he revolts to get rid of her grip. Usually, she rejects his decision to keep Peter for the night. Conversely, Craig's heated discussion about the war and one of her patients is a trial to control her perception of things. He continuously warns her against the promiscuous, philandering patient who is involved in different love affairs. Ironically, he is as unfaithful as this patient. His talk is burdened with allegories and connotations. His warning to Kelly represents inner conflict and imbalance as a confused person and disloyal husband. His analysis of her patient's case could be a call for help. She does not have the chance or perhaps does not want to bear the burden of curing her husband. As a result, he is involved in many love affairs to avenge her indifference and to get rid of a domineering, unfulfilling love relationship. Nevertheless, he does not gain satisfaction from these random relationships. He lives a psychological dilemma because of the war that brings about dangerous consequences to his life.

Craig's depression is the result of a deep feeling of alienation from life, wife and himself. When he loses his real self into a soldier in a hateful war, he experiences a kind of conflict that ends up by his suicide. He fails to reconcile his old self with the current one as a soldier in a controversial war. It is a conflict between what he believes in and what he is doing as a veteran. His feelings of estrangement and loneliness, despite his wife's presence, lead to incurable hopelessness. Her indifference to apparent signs of depression was the real motive behind his sudden death. He chooses death over leading a life with someone who does not understand his suffering. His suicide is the last resort, as he cannot redeem his true identity or change his current life. His continuous despise of Kelly's patient is allegorical. He warns that her patient lies about his numerous affairs. Craig predicts that he will leave her disappointed. Actually, this applies to his case with Kelly. He leaves her shattered and alienated. His new identity disturbs his comfort when he starts questioning his previous beliefs and faith in life. He does not accept the new one and experiences a profound conflict that leads to a total rejection and ultimate feeling of despair and willingness to end this agony.

Craig’s dispute with his wife about the war stimulates frustration, as he tries to find a point through which he can find something in common with her. Something that could rejuvenate their relationship to endure current distressful trials to dominate each other:

CRAIG: And I remember you more or less agreeing with me.

KELLY: I was sympathetic- in the *abstract* – to the “idea” of human rights, I mean, what did you expect me to argue for Saddam Hussein? Oh, this is ridiculous, you’re purposefully/ misremembering! (p. 53, *Dying City*, 2008)

The play puts into focus the hidden war between the couple. Kelly adopts a humanitarian approach to the war. However, Craig intentionally misremembers his wife’s opinion of the war to open a controversial debate that could lead to discord more than harmony. Craig and Kelly’s miscommunication is not restricted to political views; it extends to include their marital life. When the characters start to delve into their personal life, they are shocked to find it completely shattered. For example, Craig’s decision to keep Peter for the night affirms her suspicions that he does not want to be alone with her. This fusion of the political into the personal makes Iraqi war not only a political matter, but apolitical issue that has social and familial effects on the background.

In Scene Five, Kelly and Peter also satirize news media bias, as it denies audience’s agency and independence. She argues:

KELLY: It’s the sensibility. The sensibility comes closer to conveying the truth than the real news does, I think that’s what people respond to.

PETER: Yeah, but whose truth is being conveyed? Jon Stewart has so much privilege, I think it’s a pretty small slice of the “truth” he’s conveying. Like when I watch him make fun of evangelicals—if you really care about the truth, you can’t just speak to your own tiny group, you have to figure out how to speak to the community.

KELLY: The community . . . ?

PETER: People who may not be like you but that you still have—something in common with. A basic humanity. Even if they *do* believe in God, or believe in the war in Iraq. Go to the Indiana State Fair—those are the people we need to figure out how to talk to. They’re not going away, we can’t just make fun of them. Don’t you think?

.....  
PETER: But that’s the—that was one thing about Craig. He could talk to those Army guys like—it didn’t matter, Harvard, all the books he read—he never forgot where he came from. He knew that these people, whatever insane things they believed—he thought you could reach into the core of them, and find something deeper and truer than all the surface stuff, God and politics and all that. (p. 59, 2008)

Like Craig, Peter suggests that there should be a channel through which they can communicate with Iraqis. According to Peter, Iraqis may have been submitted to totalitarian regime, but Americans could help them out. There is also a fusion of the political and the spiritual as Kelly adds, “I don’t know--God and politics go pretty deep” (p. 60, 2008). The characters deliberately escape from responding to profound/ embarrassing questions. For example, Kelly does not respond to Peter’s question about dealing with bad people or healing people who harm themselves. Peter wonders, “how do you feel as a therapist? Someone comes to you with all these problems, doing all these bad things to themselves, to other people ... you have to believe that there’s a way to reach them, right? No matter how awful or crazy they seem” (p. 60, 2008). Kelly ignores his question and changes the topic to ask about his job. This asserts that politics and individuals’ lives are deeply interconnected. Peter’s questions about how to deal with people who harm themselves alludes to Craig’s suicide. Also, it refers to Kelly’s oppressive power that harms Craig. Like Craig, Peter rejects the fact that she could change the philanderer patient or anyone’s personality and asserts that the result will be disappointing. This applies to Kelly’s repressive relationship with her husband which ends up by leaving her alone with many unanswered questions.

Surprisingly, Peter knows a lot about Craig, more than his wife can tell, and his visit to her is just an investigation of their marital life in order to find out reasons behind his suicide. At the beginning, Kelly refuses to cooperate. However, Peter’s natural talk stimulates her curiosity. Patricia Cornelius argues:

At first it seems that Kelly's grief is sparked by his resemblance to her husband, and by how his unscheduled visit echoes the way the military turned up to tell her of his death. But as the play progresses, it gradually reveals an altogether darker emotional landscape that reaches beyond its domestic setting into a damning critique of a militarised, misogynistic society, and the media-saturated anaesthetisation that is both its cause and effect....Shinn weaves his argument into a lament for an increasingly decadent, anaesthetic culture, with allusions to America's great literary tradition - Melville, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Faulkner, O'Neill - cutting against the ironised poverty of the present. (n. pag., 2010)

In *Dying City*, the characters touch upon the war on Iraq in a minimal way that does not directly deal with its consequences, but it puts into focus its influence on characters’ decisions and lives. The characters experience a dramatic shift in their identities as they make life-changing decisions that may look severe or harsh. A closer look reveals that they adopt conflicting approaches toward life as the play progresses. In order to terminate their

agony, they resort to revolutionary decisions. In Craig's case, the decision is definitely inhumane, but it seems as the only way out of a living hell.

Craig's mysterious death does not have that profound influence on Kelly's life. She chooses to move on to another place which signifies a desire for a new life. She tries to escape from her memories with the twins—Peter and Craig, by moving away and ignoring Peter's trials to keep in touch. Here, she uses her power of knowledge to subjugate Peter. She chooses what to do and when to do it without leaving choices for the other side except to submit and conform to her decisions. Craig's death influences Kelly's life as much as an episode in *Law & Order*. Brantley believes:

But unlike so many contemporary plays "*Dying City*" raises obvious, important issues in anything but obvious ways. And it knows too well that closure, that ghastly word, is a mass-delusional figment of the American imagination. Kelly talks about the satisfaction of watching "*Law & Order*," in which "the mystery of a death is solved and therefore symbolically reversed." Mr. Shinn knows that nothing about a death — or a life, for that matter — is that easy. (n. pag., 2007)

Kelly simply believes that crime episodes deal with the same issue. The series always investigates a quarrel between good and evil. Nonetheless, she still finds solace in watching *Law & Order* series. In fact, they are intriguing series that give the audience satisfaction that the mysteries of life will be solved at the end of the episode. It is a promise that the audience will go through an enjoyable journey of discovery, where the hero solves the problem of the case with ultimate cleverness. This signifies that the world is controlled by strict laws. It is not acting randomly, and the characters can control their fate. Cornelius argues:

Kelly is a therapist, part of a profession that holds out the promise of "closure" in the face of trauma. But as becomes clear, her professional skills are of no use in dealing with her own trauma. She is unable to face the reality of her marriage, and instead takes refuge in television crime series....Rather than face the pain that is crippling her, she is fleeing it. (n. pag., 2010)

*Law & Order* refers to the principles and laws which govern the world. The important questions here are, are characters' lives controlled by strict rules? Do they abide by these rules? If they conform to these rules, why do they fail to achieve their intended goals? Why could following these strict rules end up in chaos and internal conflicts? Why do they end their journey of discovery with endless questions regarding the essence and purpose of their actions? For example, Craig's interrogation of the reason of the war and endless cycle of violence leads him to question his agency over his actions and compare between his past and recent self.



Craig moves on from a straightforward character into a conflicting one. He compares himself before and after going to the war; surprisingly, he changes. He is not satisfied with his new identity and denounces the influence of war on his personality. He suspects that he can redeem his old self. He argues, “I have begun to wonder if I myself will recover from who I have become here, in just a few short months. But then in quieter moments I find myself thrown back into memories of who I was before and am faced with the realization that the horror I feel here is not.... something I fully understand“ (p. 69-70, 2008). Meanwhile, Craig went to Iraq to escape a suppressing martial relationship. Now, he regrets going to Iraqi war. He believes that an endless cycle of violence will begin in Iraq to face American invasion, suspecting the idea that the American army could save Iraqis. He says:

It’s clear to everyone now that we are not equipped to bring this country back to life. The city is dying and we are the ones killing it. But I do not blame my men. They were told they would be heroes brining freedom, and instead have been told to invade people’s homes and take their freedom. They are ordered to protect themselves from violence by actively doing violence. (p. 69, 2008)

Craig experiences challenging situations in his life. The fact that he is only interested in literary studies, then he volunteered in the army says a lot about dramatic changes, using an indirect way to call for help from his wife who never thought that her husband needs her more than her patients. Kelly’s shock after Craig’s death is burdened with momentary feelings of regret. For a long time, she could not feel or even notice her husband’s misery. This fatal ignorance and serious misunderstanding lead Craig to be involved in different love relationships to punish his wife for intentional indifference to his silent suffering. Brantley states:

Mr. Shinn is less interested in violence as an external force, which acts upon his characters, than as a means of illuminating what is already inside them. The academic, literary Craig, for example, turns out to be a man who was meant to be a soldier — for all the wrong reasons. The gay Peter, who is less assertively physical, clearly learned early that you don’t need guns, knives or fists to wound and maim. (n. pag., 2007)

Peter suspects Craig’s death and bases his opinion on a letter he previously received from him. Peter begins as a passive character. His questions to Kelly about internal agony and emotional instability are more straightforward and to the point. He complains to her about recent emotional disorder. Nonetheless, she refrains from helping him and asks him to see a doctor. This asserts the fact that she is unable to understand/feel others’ agony. Although she begins her career as a therapist, she abstains from helping those who need her most. Deliberately, she tries to separate herself from previous

experiences, changing her phone numbers and refusing to communicate with Peter. Her wealthy family and luxurious life may have resulted in bringing up an indifferent person who is unable to communicate with others' struggle. She does not respond to Craig's silent and indirect evocation, nor does she respond to Peter's. Finally, Peter finds no other way except to face her with Craig's letter which summarizes his relationship with her, putting into focus psychological agony and inner struggle. Thus, Peter is following a certain plan that could cure and compel her to abandon this intended indifference and fatal ignorance. The irony lies in curing the therapist by the patients, Craig and Peter, the first by committing suicide and the second by using his brother's letter to disillusion her.

There's not a word spoken that doesn't feed the idea of struggle for power among characters' persistent attempts to subjugate each other. Kelly controls Craig, who, in turn, tries to control Peter. It is an endless chain of subjugation and manipulation. As the couple fails to relate to each other, there are different situations in which debilitating silence takes over the scene instead of heartfelt talk that could have solved many problems. The power of silence is used efficiently by Shinn to signify the characters' heightened feelings of discord and isolation. Cornelius states, "The dialogue emerges from potent silences, in which the loneliness of the characters becomes almost palpable. Highly recommended" (n. pag., 2010).

Characters' agency over their actions is also put into question, as they do not have the capability to act independently or in isolation from the harsh debilitating reality and domineering individuals in their lives. Craig ends up as a soldier fighting aimlessly in unreasonable war. Meanwhile, Peter has that physical power but he works as an actor. The play is about unequal manifestations of power in relationships among characters and attempts to negate and diminish others' agency and independence. As a response and to stand against this truth, characters decide to revolt against this subjugating reality. Craig adopts a revolutionary ideology when he commits suicide as a way to stop aggressive manipulation of his life, as he fails to control his life or stand against Kelly's dominance. Meanwhile, Kelly adopts a defeatist ideology and escapes from her shattered life. She could not withstand the pain of her husband's rebellious suicide, nor could she bear the burden of not helping him out.

Shinn subverts traditional dramatic conventions employing Brechtian techniques like unnatural time gap, non-episodic, non-linear plot, and overlapping dialogue. The characters resort to flash back of what happened in earlier times, which stresses the effect of the past on the present time. Manipulation of Brechtian techniques' is clear in Shinn's use of "time gap" between the scenes. Shinn makes use of several techniques that make the audience aware that they are watching a performance, in order to alienate and

compel the audience to think about current social and political implications of war. He uses defamiliarization techniques to estrange the audience in order to underline internal conflicts.

In Baitz's *Other Desert Cities* (2011), a family gather to celebrate Christmas Eve in 2004. Brooke, a member of the family, comes after 6 years of absence to declare her intention to publish a memoir of her brother Henry who commits suicide after bombing an army recruiting station. Her parents, Polly and Lyman, are shocked to hear the news. They strongly reject the idea, and strive to prevent Brooke from publishing the book. George Scott believes, "*Other Desert Cities* is a remarkable dramatic comedy delving into the dark corners of the family unit. An artistic portrayal of parental love, family dysfunction, and real world challenges" (n.pag., 2018). The play highlights the conflict between individual and political ideals. Characters seem like isolated islands. There are a lot of secrets and mutual accusations. Everyone tries to hold the other person responsible for the current unpleasant events. But who is responsible for what is happening? Nobody knows. Therefore, Brooke tries to investigate the reasons that lead Henry to join terrorist groups, putting blame on her parents for her brother's demise.

Like Peter in *Dying City*, Brooke tries to reveal the secrets of her brother's death. She digs deep in the past memories of the family only to be amazed by the secrets that turn her life upside down. She also discovers a lot about her family and her aunt Silda. Nothing stays as it appears to be. There are different manifestations of domination relations among characters. Layman and Polly bring up Henry to be an actor. However, their hegemonic grip over him leads to disappointing results, as he becomes entangled in terrorist attacks. Similarly, in *Dying City*, the control of Craig's wife over his life leads to a devastating consequence- death.

At times of war, characters experience huge identity changes. In *Dying City*, Craig changed his identity into a soldier. Finally, he commits suicide. In *Other Desert Cities*, Henry joins a terrorist group and bombs a recruiting station. In the process of writing a memoir about Henry's past, Brooke is shocked to find his death a fake plan that is achieved by her parents to cover his escape from US authorities. A heated debate begins between the family members. During this debate, a number of concealed secrets come to surface. It is clear that the characters have a kind of miscommunication/ mistrust that makes it hard for them to disclose or share secrets. The only solution for the family to survive the crisis is to share their hidden secrets.

Trip, Henry's brother, occupies the position of the conciliator within the family. He is called upon to bring peace among family members. He offers his support to Brooke. Trip says, "Look, if you're scared of what they might say, I'll protect you, relax." Brooke replies, "You can't protect me. Not from her. Not from Polly Wyeth" (p. 19, 2012). He admits that he is not as happy

as he seems. Everybody considers him a funny, unwise person. However, he has this neutral and objective opinion of events. He analyzes events and relationships among characters. He also gives insight to the audience about the personalities of characters and deep motivations. He admits that no one in the family knows about other members. He protests against familial conflicting attitude toward each other. He argues, "I'm pretty goddamn happy, and I'm not going to let you all take that away from me" (p. 31, 2012). He is astonished to see this kind of grudge among family members. He asks them to have the courage to forgive each other. He believes that Brooke has the right to publish the memoir and understands his parents refusal. He rejects the idea that his parents are responsible for Henry's death. He criticizes Brooke's dependence on Silda in writing the book and condemns her trial to demonize her parents.

Brooke is a novelist. She is as stubborn as her mother Polly. She never surrenders. She was hospitalized for years after her brother's death. When her father lectures her about her health, she replies, "One of the myths about pain is that one apparently can't literally remember it. Which is why women have more than one child. Well, Daddy, I'm here to tell you, I have a very good memory for pain" (p. 16, 2012). Brooke implies that she still remembers her brother's demise. She is a strong character. She never yields to her parents. She adds, "Daddy, look at me. I've had rough times and everything that has happened to me—everything—has made me stronger. I'm your child. And Mom's. Two old trees. Two old oak trees. And I'm an oak, too" (p. 17, 2012). Brooke confirms that she inherited this strong character from her parents. The only predictable result of the heated debate among these strong characters is an inevitable conflict. Brooke's agency is put into question when she declares her intention to publish the book. Ironically, she has this urge to have her parents' consent first. However, she is faced with utter refusal and shocking secrets.

Polly was a screenwriter. She used to work with her sister, Silda. She is a domineering mother. She declares that taking care of her sister is such an agonizing experience. Polly maintains, "Families get terrorized by their weakest member, it's true. Look at me; I've to take care of Silda ALL my life. She doesn't have a cent, she is alive thanks to us, and she has to live within spitting distance.... I can't even go to Europe for fear of having her some sort of catastrophe" (p. 22, 2012). Polly urges her son, Trip, to take care of his sister, Brooke. She believes that her daughter is too weak to live in this world. Polly admits, "I don't like weakness. I've tried to push her, to be hard on her so that she wouldn't sink....you can die from too much sensitivity in this world" (p. 22, 2012). Perhaps, Polly's loss of her son, Henry, motivates her to be overprotective. However, she is pushing her family members to act beyond their power. Ed Huyck believes, "Polly is a brutal taskmaster, quick with a cutting comment to anyone within earshot" (n. pag., 2013). Therefore, Polly's

unrelenting insistence on controlling others stimulates resistance against her dominance.

Silda's inappropriate relationship with her sister, Polly, is also put into focus during the discussion. She despises her sister's hegemony and cruelty. She has suicidal tendency and attempts to end her meaningless life. It seems that suicide is the only means to achieve things in life. Silda also influences Brooke's perception of events, as she interferes in the writing process of the book, enforcing demonizing description of Brooke's parents, claiming that their cruelty pushed Henry to commit suicide. She presents half-truths and imposes falsified perception of events. Later on, Brooke discovers that Silda gives up on Henry when he needed her help. Eileen Warburton argues, "yet, the most potent question is: what *is* 'the Truth'? And what is really the moral way of living with it?"(n. pag., 2015)

Lyman was an actor. He was as an ambassador in Reagan's time. He is the negotiator. He tries to convince Brooke to postpone publishing the memoir. Lyman and Polly impose certain identity on their children, which entails thinking and behaving according to definite social norms. For example, they try to prevent their daughter from publishing the memoir. Also, they sent Henry to a boarding school where he can be brought up as an actor like his father to prevent him from expressing antiwar opinion. Lyman believes, "He was wonderful. He would have been a movie star" (p. 37, 2012). Surprisingly, he was involved in terrorist attacks against an armless veteran. He fights against his parents hegemonic dominance and joins left-wing extremists. He chose a new path but a wrong one.

There is a severe conflict between the characters over who can have the last word in this discussion. Everyone strives to control the other. Misunderstanding and suspicion are the main features of relationships among characters. Therefore, overlapping dialogues, which shows Baitz indebtedness to Brecht, are used to denote characters' impatience and defensive attitudes toward each other. The barren desert is also a symbol of characters' barren and futile argument about deep beliefs and incidents that happened a long time ago. Both playwrights- Shinn and Baitz, use silence to enhance dramatic effect, as it gives time to the audience to imagine and contribute to the dialogue by imagining how the answer would look like if the characters have the chance to express themselves.

Like Craig, Henry changes from being an actor into a terrorist who bombs an armless veteran. Both characters suffer from hegemonic relationships; Craig with his wife Kelly and Henry with his parents. Like Peter, Brooke begins a journey of discovery in order to find out how her brother was killed. However, Peter and Trip have so much in common. They both analyze individual motivations easily. Both Craig and Henry are controlled or subjugated by members of their families. Craig is controlled by his wife who

tries to direct his actions and limit his choices. Similarly, Henry is controlled by his parents who impose a certain identity on him while depriving him of his agency.

*Dying City & Other Desert Cities* shed light on the constitution of individual identities that are formed by their adoption of imposed roles and identities in the family and society. The characters' adoption of revolutionary identities results from their inability to stand against imposed paternal domination of their lives. In *Dying city*, Craig chooses to commit suicide to end an identity dilemma. However, Henry in *Other Desert Cities* joins a terrorist group and begins a discovery journey in order to search for a genuine identity.

#### 4- Conclusion:

In brief, *Dying City & Other Desert Cities* deal with Iraqi war in non-political way, as they highlight public bewilderment toward the eligibility of the war decision. Shinn and Baitz maintain that individuals are not certain about their inner emotions and conflicts. Therefore, how could they be certain about outer conflicts or wars? The discourse among characters about war becomes alienating, as it underlines deep misunderstanding and miscommunication. The war discourse is just a means to dig deep in their personal lives to be amazed by that amount of discord among family members. The playwrights suggest that public conflicts could deeply affect private relationships. In both plays, the serious disagreement among characters over the eligibility of war grows to include their private life, as violence seems to affect their familial/private lives drastically. In *Dying City* Craig chooses suicide to settle down inner conflict about who he has become, while in *Other Desert Cities* Henry adopts a defeatist attitude in order to escape the aggressive grip of his parents.

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