



THE THEME OF BROKEN RELATIONSHIPS IN DAVID MAMET'S PLAYS

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ABSTRACT:

Mamet has depicted the fears and loss of trust, as the dominating feelings between men-women relationship in contemporary society. He portrays the corruption of business ethic which in results has eroded the feeling of community among fellow human beings.

KEYWORDS:

FRAGMENTARY RELATIONSHIPS, URBAN COUPLES, COMMODITY, LIBERATED, FANTASIZE.

The other theme which occupies a prominent place in Mamet's theatrical world is the theme of broken relationship among his characters. He deliberately depicts such people who lack genuine love which is an essential quality for enduring relationships. Mamet experienced the agony of broken relationships since his childhood. His parents were divorced when he was only ten. *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* is the first major attempt of Mamet at play writing. It deals with the fragmentary relationships of two urban couples and shows how the separation of his parents had left a tremendous impact on him.

Broken relationships are also responsible for the vigorous pursuit of money, success and power by his characters. They apply commercial norms to personal relationship. This practice has eroded basic human sentiments among them. Man and woman have become a commodity for each other. In his plays, people come together momentarily when they have some vested interest. They are strangers after its fulfilment. In an interview with Roudane, Mamet has pointed out that if a person becomes a commodity, then he has to rely on the goodness of others, not only for his bread, but also for his happiness (80). This is the fundamental factor responsible for the attenuated relationship among his characters. The market values have penetrated the human relationships.

In a play *Speed-the-Plow*, Mamet has presented women as not much behind in the race for power. They are equally capable of doing business. In some areas, woman's is better in comparison to men. Karen, the secretary in the play was successful in persuading Gould, the head of production department, to greenlight the movie of her choice. The honesty of her character made him to change the decision at the last moment. Mamet thinks that the women have an easier way to success. In *Speed-the-Plow*, he shows that men succeed through "work" whereas women get success through "sex" (71). Bigsby has rightly commented that "men and women are in some sense

antagonists, defending themselves against one another, asserting their rights, defending their territory" (A critical Introduction, 261-2).

In Mamet's plays, sex is a metaphor for failures and insufficiencies of life. His characters assert their identity and existence through it. Sex provides an escape from harsh realities of life. In some cases, it has turned out to be "a metaphor for violence" as Almansi points out (191). In *American Buffalo* when Teach picks up a bit of toast from Ruthie's plate, she says, "Help yourself" (10). Teach responds bitterly at Ruthie's rude behaviour. He says, "the only way to teach these people is to kill them" (11). In *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, Danny threatens Deborah, his mistress, when she refuses to satisfy him. "I don't mind physical violence. I just can't stand emotional violence" (57). His friend and associate Bernie believes that there are only two ways to deal with women. Firstly, "to Treat Em Like Shit." Secondly, "Nothing....nothing makes you so attractive to the opposite getting your rocks off on a regular basis" (22). The consumerist attitude of males regarding females is also responsible for men women relationships in modern times.

The situation is different today. Women are liberated. They don't accept norms dictated by men. They are equally qualified and educated as their counterparts. Men cannot take advantage of them by coercion or by invoking some social customs. The enlightenment of women's consciousness is also a factor in the strenuous relationship between men and women in modern times. Eric Fromm said, "love is an act of faith." It "means to commit oneself without guarantee, to give oneself completely in the hope that our love will produce love in the loved person" (127-8). In our times, neither men nor women are ready for sacrifice. Their relations are based on the theory of give and take. In a beautiful play *The Woods*, Mamet shows how human behaviour is not a bit different than animals. "The liking that we have for things-desire-is just our body's way

to tell us things" (8).

The social critics such as David Reisman, Daniel Bell and others believe that sex seems to be the last frontier for Americans. It has replaced the cult of Mammon. The reduction of modern man to his animal level is complete in this field. Mamet seems to repudiate their views. His men are failures in this field also. In Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Deborah walks out of Danny's apartment saying "You want comfort, come get comfort. What am I, your toaster?" (57). Similarly in another situation, Bernie recalls an incident of having sex with a girl of twenty. While they were engaged, the girl took out a five gallon jerrycan which was full of gasoline and splashed it all over the wall and lit a fire. The room was enveloped in flames. Bernie ran in shorts to save his life (17). Like the pursuit of riches, sex is a dominant feature of Mamet's characters. The same criteria applies here, that success shapes the relationships of his characters with the opposite sex. Therefore, dejected by both the worlds, Mamet's characters fantasize about sex. They derive pleasure in ogling at the anatomical parts of beautiful girls at public places.

Hubert-Leibler has pointed out one more factor which constricts the relationship of men and women in modern times. He writes that in Mamet's plays, "latent or overt homo-sexuality is present in a number of relationship". It appears frequently "within the teacher student paradigm" [563]. In Sexual Perversity in Chicago, Mamet has given a number of clues of this fact that Danny and his associate Bernie are homosexuals. Whereas Deborah openly admits that she is a lesbian (23). Bigsby has drawn a very succinct picture of Mamet's world in his criticism:

Mamet's is a world of collapsing marriages, attenuated relationships and disintegrating values. The physical world is in a state of decay: lakes are polluted, the countryside characterised by an autumnal dissolution. The city streets are violent and inhabited by petty criminals, pimps and prostitutes.... His characters seem to have lost their human instincts, except for the blind desperation with which they reach out for one another - a gesture, however, which appears doomed to fail. They have surrendered an essential component of their individuality along with their moral sense (David Mamet, 66).

In Lakeboat, which is an earlier play of Mamet, one of the character defines women as, "soft things with a hole in the middle" (59). The bizarre definition reduces women's function to the level of a cog in the machine. They have no other relevance except of a device which provides physical satisfaction. Mamet has focused his play on a life based "purely on ritual lusting." In contemporary American society, he observes that life is "erotized" and people want to enjoy it "unmediated by anything else" (Herman 136).

In Thomas Middleton's tragedy Women Beware Women, game of chess was used to divert public attention when the Duke was engaged with the lady. T.S. Eliot invoked a scene of it in The Wasteland to draw the public attention towards the perversity of the modern world. Mamet is also agonised at the fragmentary relationships of urban

couples. In Sexual Perversity in Chicago, he has tried to shed myths, related to sexuality. He has also portrayed the lapse of social norms in controlling human behaviour. Bernie argues while wooing Joan, "what the fuck do you think society is, just a bunch of rules strung together for your personal pleasure?" (21). Therefore, in contemporary American society, Mamet finds no social, moral, ethical and spiritual values which bind people together. They are liberated from all responsibilities. This is the reason that people do not find solace in their relationships. They are dislocated from the world as well as from their own self.

Mamet thinks in contemporary American society loss of trust in fellow human being has eroded the feeling brotherliness and compassion for other fellow man. This tendency has alienated them not only from others, but their own self. They are in perpetual anxiety. There is no peace in their mind. The fears, failure and incompleteness have made them violent and aggressive. It has also provided them with extra vigour for the pursuit of material ends. The profane has become sacred. The faith in supreme authority of God has been shattered. It has given way to nihilism.

Mamet has exemplified in his plays that economic system is not solely responsible for the erosion of human relationship in contemporary American society. There are also other pressures which "threaten to deform sensibilities and intimidate them into conspiring in their own irrelevance" (Bigsby, Mamet, 130). In his plays, he portrays a world, where there is an unbridgeable gap between social expectations and individual needs. The frustration of insufficiency has generated a feeling of suspicion, hatred and fear among people which in turn has deeply affected their interpersonal relationships.

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