



GLENGARRY GLEN ROSS: A CRITIQUE OF CAPITALISM

DR. ALI HASAN ¹

¹ ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH, GOVERNMENT COLLEGE, MALPURA(TONK).

ABSTRACT:

Mamet thinks one of the major cause of ethical perversity in American Society is the self-centeredness of its people. The infiltration of business ethic in private lives has made the situation worse. Each individual thinks the other to be a commodity. The weakness of one is the strength of the other.

KEYWORDS:

CAPITALISM, HOT LEADS, BOARD, DISENCHANTED, SALESMAN, STOCKS.

The grip of capitalism is more firm in Glengarry Glen Ross, a play which won Mamet the Pulitzer prize for 1984. The play is based on his practical experience of working as a salesman. He describes the incident as "a fly-by- operation which sold tracts of undeveloped land in Arizona and Florida to gullible Chicagoans" (qtd. Bigsby, Mamet, 112). The play depicts the pathetic condition of the salesmen who, Mamet thinks are the agents of capitalism. The salesmen build fake and unintelligible dreams to convince customer of the value of his worthless goods.

Glengarry Glen Ross is the extension of American Buffalo. The robbery did not take place in that play because the persons involved were full of fears and lacked the necessary will to execute the plan. The prime mover of the robbery, Don realised towards the end that there are still persons who care for friendship and loyalty- the traditional bond of unity. The robbery does take place in Glengarry Glen Ross and shows Mamet's concern for the world of 1983, the year in which Glengarry was first performed. Mamet found this world much more bleaker than the world of 1977, when American Buffalo was first performed. In an interview with Bigsby, speaking of American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross, Mamet said that both plays are "set deeply in the milieu of capitalism" (Mamet, 111).

Mamet was uncertain about the production of the play. He sent a copy of it to British playwright, Harold Pinter. Pinter's enthusiasm for the play was shared by National Theatre in London, where it was first performed in september, 1983. It won two awards in England. In February 1984, it was staged by the Goodman Theatre in Chicago and then moved on to Broadway, where it won the Pulitzer prize of 1984. Mamet pays tribute to Pinter by saying, "he was instrumental in getting it done" (Harriott 84).

Glengarry Glen Ross is a well structured play. It consists of two Acts. Mamet's confidence about his new play is

expressed when he says, "I wrote a million episodic plays. I can write them with my left hand. So what? Who cares? Fortunately, I got sick of it before (the audience) did" (qtd. in Jennifer Allen 41). Mamet is optimistic about the play and says that the contemporary playwrights such as Terrence Rattigan and Sidney Kingslay would love his new play.

The play Glengarry Glen Ross, begins with the background announcement that a company which sells land has organised a competition among its salesmen to gear up their performance. Those who would win will get a cadillac car and the runner would receive a set of steak knives. The losers would be dismissed from the service. The hot leads, that is the name and address of the prospective customers, would be given to only those salesmen who had closed on the board-a technical term which indicates the graph of past performance of each salesman. Bigsby writes that "the elegant simplicity of this arrangement serves to expose the operation of a system in which success, defined in purely financial terms, is rewarded, and failure summarily punished" (Mamet, 113).

Levene, a salesman aged fifty pleads with Williamson, who is a decade younger to him and is the office manager, to provide him hot leads. Williamson refuses because Levene has not closed on the board. Levene, like Willy Loman reminds him of his glorious past record but his pleading has no effect on the young manager.

In a scene which is not different from the previous one two salesmen, Moss and Aaronow, both aged fifty, talks about the announced competition. Aaronow is confused because he feels incapable of increasing the sale. He fears dismissal as the rules of the company provide that the losers are to be fired. Moss, another salesman is not much different in his thinking from Teach of American Buffalo. He criticises the system which does not provide them with any opportunity to succeed. He draws Aaronow's attention towards the fact that the company gives them only ten

percent commission on the sale. The amount is disproportionate to their hard work and acute pressure under which they work. To overcome this system, there seems to be only one way left for Moss "Someone should rob the office" (21). The view is not different from the one expressed in American Buffalo by Teach, "the only way to teach these people is to kill them" (11). Aarnow is agonised by working of the brutal system which robs them of their honour and identity day by day. He becomes disturbed about the criminal attitude of Moss. He says, "we sat down to eat dinner, and here I'm a criminal" (26). Mamet's hope lies in the persons like Aarnow who are disenchanted with the system and moan the infiltration of criminal elements in business dealings.

Scene third of Act one is a superb manifestation of salesmen rhetoric. Roma, a successful salesman, aged forty, appears on stage. He is busy talking to Lingk a prospective customer. The talk is dominated by Roma while Lingk only provides the clues to make him speak. The important thing to move is how the salesmen draw people's sympathy by describing ordinary things of life. In order to attract the attention of Lingk, Roma applies the same tactics as Jerry did on Peter in The Zoo Story. He begins his discussion with basic questions such as "what is our life?" And what is it that we're afraid of?" (28). There is more or less one answer to this query and that is loss. The human beings become sad at small irregularities. Most of the time they do not feel secure. For some people accumulation of money provides relief. Mamet thinks that there is no limit to acquiring money. It is a vicious race which never ends. Roma draws Lingk's attention towards this fact by asking, "How can I be secure? (Pause). Through amassing wealth beyond all measure? No. what's beyond all measure? That's a sickness. That's a trap. There is no measure. Only greed (28)". Similar views have been expressed by Mamet in an interview with Bigsby:

The idea of go West and make your fortune, Here's gold lying in the ground, was an idea promulgated by the storekeepers in the gold rush and the railroads in the westward expansion as a way of enslaving the common man and woman... playing on their greed (Mamet, 111).

Roma wins Lingk to his faith by narrating the human condition. He says to him that each day man decides that he will act without fear and according to the dictates of his mind. Roma pauses and then mentions "Stocks, bonds, objects of art, real estate. Now: what are they? (Pause.) An opportunity. To what? To make money? Perhaps to lose money?" (29). The scene is thus a remarkable exhibition of Mamet's observation of life and its representation of speech cadences with minute details.

The second Act takes place in a real estate office which had been ransacked the previous night. Baylen, a detective officer, interrogates each salesman individually. Levene arrives with the news of a remarkable sale. He is surrounded by Roma and Moss. Levene describes how he made Bruce and Harriett Nyborg to sign the contract. He waited twenty two minutes without any word or motion

for their decision. At last they signed. It seems that "it was like they wilted all at once. No gesture... nothing. Like together." A "kind of imperceptibly slumped" upon them. He reaches and takes the pen and signs, he passes it to her, she signs. It was so fucking solemn" (44). The event presents a sharp criticism of the system in which people take pleasure in the ignorance and inadequacies of other human beings. Almansi has rightly pointed out that for the salesman a customer "appears as an enemy to be annihilated; a "cocksucker", in fact, who must be forced to kneel and humiliated into signing the contract" (206).

Lingk, a customer comes to the office to revoke his contract which he and his wife signed the previous day. Roma, who had benefited from this contract become nervous on his arrival. He enacts a sort of a play to delude him. Other salesmen join him immediately and take their roles. They tell him all kinds of lies to make him forget the deal. Commenting on the nature of Mamet's characters Bigsby remarks, "pressed back against the reality of their situation, they become desperate, self-obsessed, self-justifying. Released into their roles as story tellers, they become brilliantly inventive, creating personae must as playwright creates characters" (Mamet, 114). Williamson comes out of the office in the meantime. He tells the truth to Lingk that his cheque is already cashed. The company is now insured. Lingk is aghast at this revelation, Whereas the other salesmen abuse Williamson of throwing up the deal. Mamet shows how there is a total apathy towards the human situation. Almansi thinks that a salesman's job is much "closer to plunder." He "is a new version of the highway robber, who uses a biro instead of a gun" (204).

In the heated discussion with Levene, Williamson gets the clue to the fact that Levene might have been the salesman who had ransacked office. He threatens him with arrest. Levene admits that he robbed the office and Moss was his partner. They sold the leads to Jerry Graff, the manager of another company. Levene says that what had prompted him to rob was the desire to remain the number one salesman. He was frustrated in his aim, the last night because Williamson refused to give him premium leads. He says, "I wasn't cut out to be a thief. I was cut out to be a salesman. And now I'm back, and I got my balls back" (62).

Glengarry Glen Ross is a successful portrayal of one more evil aspect of capitalism. Mamet writes in the New York Times of 28 March 1984 that to him "the play is about a society based on business... a society with only one bottom line: How much money you make" (qtd. in Bigsby, Mamet, 111). The pressure is on making money. Nobody is bothered about the means employed to achieve that end. In American Buffalo, Teach was frustrated by his own deeds and perverted thinking. Similarly the play Glengarry ends with agony of Roma:

it's not a world of men, Machine... it's a world of clock watchers, bureaucrats, office holders... what it is, it's a fucked up world... there's no adventure to it (Pause) dying breed. Yes it is. (Pause) we are the members of a dying breed (64).

Mamet thinks that the business philosophy which is based on deceit and opportunism is the main cause of the dislocation of traditional values in contemporary American society. The application of business ethic in personal relationship has created a wide gap between individuals. In this system, the vulnerable people are those who do not have any access to the means to become rich. They are frustrated. They are looking desperately for an opportunity to do well but the society does not provide them with any chance. Mamet's sympathy lies with these people. He is fascinated by their efforts. But in pursuit of money, power and success they have innudated all boundries of social norms. "Philosophy, language and morality are prostituted" (Bigsby, Mamet, 116).

Mamet writes the about people he is fascinated with. The impetus to write a play about salesman came from a conversation he had with his wife's stepfather. He told him how savage the competition was for sales, particularly among older men. He described one incident in which an older salesman was so terrified about making a presentation that he had a heart attack on the spot "and the new president of the company stepped over his body to leave the room" (qtd. in Gussow, "Real Estate", 19).

The play received wide acknowledgement from critics. Though varying in opinion, they admit that the play is a criticism of capitalism. Gill writes in The New Yorker that in Glengarry, Mamet "is indignant at the rat's maze through which his corrupt, anguished salesmen are forced daily to drive themselves in pursuit of rewards characterstic of our contemptible consumer society" (Lower Depths, 114). Nightangle gave him the title "the bard of modern immortality." He writes, "it is a moral play, not a moralising one". Mamet "seeks to "tell the truth" about the usually invisible violence men inflict on themselves and each other as they grab for gold" (5). According to him, Mamet's salesmen "don't show so much as a glimmer, a flicker, a spark of feeling for those they fleece" (23). Brustein called the play "a jungle populated with beasts of prey who nevertheless possess the single redeeming quality of friendship" (28-29).

Most of the above critics have blamed the system for dehumanisation of mankind rather than individuals. They are bound to follow unethical practises in order to survive. "By the time capitalism reaches Mamet, Bruster" writes, "greed seems to have infected the community in toto, pervading the thoughts, actions and rhetoric of its citizens" (337). Mamet is not pessimistic about the situation, rather he is agonised. Playing a role in the drama of decadence in 1986, he says, "our civilization is convulsed and dying, and it has not yet gotten the message. It is sinking, but it has not sunk into complete barbarity..." (qtd. in Bruster, 345).

In the play Glengarry Glen Ross, Mamet presents a sharp criticism of capitalism. The business ethic has infiltrated in modern man personal behaviour. They are dominated by the pursuit of becoming successful. Mamet has presented the situation in which common people are loser. These people are determined to become wealthy. They are not

bothered achieve success by fair or foul means. But the system does not provide them any opportunity to be successful.

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