

David Mamet's Attitude towards a Woman in his Play *Oleanna*: A Feminism Approach

¹⁻ Ahmed Hussein Abbood Altaai

General Directorate of Education of Karbala altaaiy@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0220-6718>

²⁻ Habeeb Lateef Kadhim Al-Qassab

General Directorate of Education of Diwaniyah,
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0220-6715>

³⁻ Elaf Muther Muslim

General Directorate of Education of Diwaniyah
Sofiwe678@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7306-0173>

Abstract

David Mamet is one of the most distinctive dramatists in American literature. He wrote more than thirty-five plays and many of them directed by himself. *Oleanna* is one of the most important Mamet's plays. It deals with two main characters, John who is a professor in a university seeks for his superior to his student Carol in term of machismo. In his play *Oleanna*, Mamet tackled with ideals of capitalistic ideology and American Institutional system to show how a woman struggles to achieve her identity in a patriarchal society. In fact, Mamet wants to create men-only world to which the woman has small role in this world. As result, their behaviors (man and woman), their views towards everybody around them is based on fear of each other. In other words, the woman wants to find some order into world of disorder, fear and harassment. This paper attempts to analyze this play based on feminist approach.

Keywords: David Mamet, *Oleanna*, Feminism, Gender, Language

I. Background of the Study

David Mamet is one of the most prominent dramatists in twentieth century. He wrote more than thirty plays, essays and two novels. He is a well-known American playwright who was received a Pulitzer Prize for his masterpiece play *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1984), he could also gain a Tony nomination. He has been extraordinarily creative writer throughout his career. He has become domestic playwright. Bigsby and Carroll published the first book for which Mamet achieved his fame in literary field. Many critics criticize Mamet for his myths of masculinity. Other critics, such as Steven Price

typical of Mamet's language in his plays, many insulting words are employed to address women. In most Mamet's plays, his female characters are just doing their expectable sexual roles which have been attributed to them by a malecontrolled society.

2. Significance and Innovation of the Study

This study is important in that although more than ninety percent of David Mamet's plays are male-based, *Oleanna* shows a different feature because female characters like Carol are fighting hard against the oppression. In fact, the importance of the current study lies in the efforts that female protagonists of Mamet's plays make in order to destabilize and discredit the orthodox roles authorized to them by a masculine society.

Critics have thought of *Oleanna* as one of the most distinguished works of a playwright who is obsessed with misogyny, many scholars of *Oleanna* have explored its issues of power (Ryan, 1996, p. 393). Steven Ryan has also said that *Oleanna* should be characterized as one of Mamet's famous plays that comprise characters who "rely, or try to rely, on manipulation and intimidation to accomplish self-serving goals." Most studies of *Oleanna* reveal the numerous constituents of power that force the drama.

3. Methodology

The current study is going to analyze *Oleanna* through a feminism approach. The importance of

illustrates that Mamet is truly effected by feminism.

David Mamet's plays have been mostly male-based with women taking short parts. However, in some plays including *Oleanna*, women like Carol seem to be taking control and struggling against oppression (Piette, 2004, p. 84). According to Radavich (1994), Mamet's "women characters are either absent or presented as natural disturbers of the male order" (p. 123). Even when they step on stage, it is the "language of contempt, hatred, and dehumanization that is insistently allied to matching attitudes toward women" (Jacobs, 1996, p. 167). Actually, as it is

this methodology is that feminism has always been a great concern in literary works. What led to the rise of this movement dates back to their awareness of the class difference and oppression, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the 1970s feminism turned into a significant movement in Britain, and several protuberant feminists related its rise to the issue of class struggle.

This movement has such important writers as Juliet Mitchell, Margaret Coulson, and Leonora Lloyd. This component went into deterioration in the late 70s. consequently, the stagnation was from 1974 onwards and the move to monetarist politics with the election of Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States. Many objectors could occupy jobs in local government and higher education. Thus, as the result of gender and class becoming decoupled, postmodernism's influence started to grow.

Feminism has been one of the most common themes in postmodern era and has attracted the attention of many critics because just as the same of the previous plays, some postmodern plays show the mainstream of the female characters dedicated to outmoded gender roles. Musse (1971) states:

"It is a banal truth that an individual's sex role is the most salient of his many social roles. No other social role directs more of his overt behavior, emotional reactions, cognitive functions, covert attitudes and general psychological and social

adjustments.... Nor is the ascription of any role more fundamental for the maintenance and continuity of society. Activities, tasks, characteristics and attitudes are assigned differently to men and women in all cultures" (p. 707).

Mamet's plays are no exception; however, *Oleanna* is a different case in this regard. In fact, this study is significant since although there was an increase in prominence of women during the periods of modern and postmodern, some playwrights like Mamet have been completely different.

During these eras, women gained an eminent status, and also the notions of gender and gender roles underwent drastic changes. In the Modern era women increased the political and social eminence. In the early 1900s, the feminism was mainly preoccupied with the matter of vote. Although Modern thinkers supported feminism and female writers achieved fame, Dekovan (1999) declared that, "Despite the powerful presence of women writers in the founding of modernism and throughout its history, and despite the near-obsessive preoccupation with femininity in all modernist writing, the reactive misogyny so apparent in much male-authored Modernism continues in many quarters to produce a sense of Modernism as a masculine movement" (p. 126).

With the postmodernism's interest in the other and in objecting to the silent, literary figures could talk about their feminist ideology during the latter half of the 20th century. As well, they also entered these ways of thinking into theatre. Of course, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries that these changes could be noticed remarkably (Case, 1988, p. 48).

4. Discussion

Mamet states that *Oleanna* is a play about power, John and Carol are two characters with struggle to achieve their position in society. Furthermore, achieving their position in society has become more important than pursuing their interests. And that leads them down fall. It is assumed that Mamet's female characters lead to conflicts for men. Hall (1992)

claims that Mamet's females characters do not only reflect male's desire; they try to rebel against male's oppression (p. 139). As Christopher Bigsby (1985) states that "underscores the emptiness" of the boundary fable of macho self-reliance and also helps account for the unfruitfulness and solidity of Mamet's world. He illustrates that man's belief in their existence even those false myths fragment around them (p. 15).

Azizmohammadi and Amini (2014) have also acknowledged that the females characters in Mamet's plays can be assumed as rebellious resisters of male insincerity and dishonesty. These women are actually the most operative means of Mamet's intense interrogation of "male self-aggrandizement and of his agenda of contemporary spiritual reparation although they suffer most and are most oppressed" (p. 460). It can be stated that in Mamet's play gender identity is a structure of acts while John and Carol as the main characters change their point continuously to take the power, so the sex/gender division deals with an indispensable cutting off between sexed bodies and socially erected genders. In *Oleanna*, Mamet's characters explain themselves in ways that will result in an anticipated objective (p. 460).

Carol as the central female character in *Oleanna* is thought by many critics as the most persistent and self-confident female character in Mamet's play (Jacobs, 2000, p. 118). Carol in *Oleanna* is a university student and intends to develop her position in the society; however, she is not only unable to achieve this goal alone but also incapable of getting help from her professor. As soon as she understands that the professor's unrestricted control permits him to violate any rule, she decides to report him to the Tenure Committee of the university in order to charge him with sexism and racism.

During the first act of the play, the audiences become familiar with John who is talking on the phone while Carol has sat across from him so that she can talk to him. John has recently been promoted and due to this promotion, he and his wife intend to buy a new home and this is why his wife calls him constantly to tell him the

problems that she has with their realtor. When John finishes talking with her, Carol revealed to him that she came to his office since she cannot comprehend the material in his class.

John is at first indifferent and even impolite towards Carol. However, as soon as he realizes that she is really worried, he comforts Carol that she will gain an 'A' degree if she agrees to meet him secretly to teach her the lecture. He reveals his feeling to her and that he has similar intrusions as a student. The professor lays his hand on Carol's shoulder to ease her, but she rattles it. Carol looks as if she wants to tell John a secret when the phone rings again. It is John's wife, and she tells him that she invented the realtor issues to try to get him to come home for a surprise party. John hangs up and goes home instantly.

In the progress of the play, it is a diverse daytime and Carol is also in John's office. She has filed a grievance in which she has accused John for rape by putting his hand on her shoulder during their preceding meeting, making sexist explanations in class, and teaching sluttish material. Shocked by Carol's allegations, John attempts to discuss the issue in secret with her. He tells her that a few problematic remarks shouldn't devastate his whole career.

Carol exposes that his act represents serious social problem, and that she is being suggested by her colleagues that supports her protest against him. The phone rings again. It is John's wife who has called to ask if she should cancel the loan on their new home or not. He tells her not to cancel it yet as he is dealing with the problem, and hangs up. Carol tells John that she will discuss his behavior, and tries to leave his office. John grasps her to compel her to listen him out, but she shouts and asks a help.

In the third act, we understand that Carol's protest has been fruitful. John has been deferred from teaching and may be fired from the university. Nonetheless, John requests Carol back to his office to argue the problem again. During their discussion, Carol who is upset with John's language just corrects him and accuses him since he goes with a system that assists his superiority. She says that her "allegations" against him are now "facts" because they have been proven. After

John tells her that he is going to lose his job, she suggests to draw her grievance in exchange for him agreeing to prevent a list of books from the university, including some that he had written himself. John angrily declines her request.

When John states that he was not in home in, Carol says him that if he had, he would have known that her cares against him now include tried rape. John dismisses her. His wife calls again, and he replies the phone. Carol warns John for calling his wife "baby" before trying to leave his office. John detonates at this and hits Carol brutally, griping a chair over her head as she trembles on the earth.

In this play, it can be noticed very well that the theme of power plays an important role. John as the university professor symbolizes the masculine society and the men being superior to women. The relationship between John and Carol is a clear symptom because Carol is a student and dependent to her professor. Hence, she asks for his help. In the first act, this power relation is observed through John by recurrently cutting her off mid-sentence and finishing her sentences. Moreover, when she intends to disclose her secret, he interrupts her by answering his phone.

The phone calls indicates that John is so narcissistic that he does not identify own rudeness and lack of respect for Carol by permitting these frequent disturbance. This thing can be seen when Carol wants to reveal something very significant to him:

" CAROL: I am bad, Oh God.

JOHN: It's all right.

CAROL: I can't talk about this.

JOHN: It's alright. Tell me.

CAROL: I always... all my life ...I have never told anyone this..." (Mamet, p. 66)

As soon as the phone rings, John responses it, and they never come back to their dialogue. The continual phone calls prevent Carol to reveal her feelings to him and he is incapable of aware of her emotions. He is unwilling to give her enough time to express something that is very significant.

It is also seen that during the last parts in particular, John noticeably ignores Carol's outlooks. In the final scene John also reduces her

to just a part of the body instead of a human being. However, through her use of language, Carol proves to be more powerful because John's power of language reduces and his statements lose their influence. In their last two meetings, Carol converses about their struggle and asks for his demotion. She does this right through the use of the same great words that John used in Scene I. Actually, here the dramatist means to say that power is not only dependent in one's physical power or class and an important feature like the language can lead to somebody being considered as the most or the least powerful.

An issue which has always been of high significance in Mamet's plays is the issue of language. In *Oleanna*, Mamet has also tried to create the character and identity of Carol through her words. *Oleanna* is an extraordinary example of language as a means to craft a character since there are some statements such as in Act 1, where John says to Carol, "Now look: I'm a human being..." Carol who is begging for a better grade proclaims, "I'm stupid." (Mamet, p. 12)

A professor anguishes, describing Carol as an "angry" girl, a explanation which she discards. He also states a sentence that stands as an unquestionable sample of how language makes character: "I was raised to think myself stupid ... If the young child is told he cannot understand." In all three acts John and Carol try to state the other, ignore the other's definition, and define him/herself in a way that is more individually sufficient to each.

Mamet's *Oleanna* is his depiction of gender relations in which men and women are in constant conflicts. Mamet states that "men and women seem to be terrified of each other in . . . in the main. What can one say? What can't one say? How does one behave correctly? And I think that, that the amount of anger and repression this causes in both men and women is, is enormous . . ." (Bragg, 2001, pp. 143-144).

Mamet's language is believed to be "a major means to indicate any character's selfawareness and moral insight, and so his chance for connection with others" (Carrol, David Mamet 22). Thus, those characters who surpass others in this regard and are the best speakers are also the

best ones at self-deception. In other words, the better characters are at unfolding themselves, the less they know about themselves, so what they say about themselves cannot be trustworthy.

In the first act, what we understand through Carol's words is that John is an important person who has power over her. She needs his help. John defines himself as an imperfect human who is to a great extent like Carol and is himself a victim of the same system which is oppressing Carol. Actually, John means to get Carol out of his office so that he can go after his new house and job security. Up to this part, everything is ok, but in the second act, the conflict between these two characters increases through which they are trying to define self and other.

In this act, Carol thinks of John as a deceitful man who displays his dominance over his students. Carol calls John an oppressor who misuses his power just to quench his satisfaction. However, John thinks of himself as someone Carol should rely on without being scared at all. Also, he says that he is an unselfish man whose sole preoccupation is with the happiness of others, especially his family, students, and Carol of course.

In the third act, Carol states that John is inattentive, scornful, and insolent. On the other hand, John defines himself as a supportive teacher who does not misuse his power over students. Conversely, as soon as he sees that he cannot convince Carol to forget about her objection, his self-definition changes because he starts to talk about himself as a decent and honorable teacher. He calls himself a moral man who is eager to victimize himself for his ethical goals. Actually, what is seen now is that their definitions are completely different from what they had stated before.

Carol's difficulties in the class is not an incapacities for learning John's concepts, but she cannot accept them. This meaning can be touch when John says " It's just a course. It's just a book". Her responses to his arrogant

"No. No. There are people out there. People who came here to know something

That they did not know. To came here to be helped. To be helped. So someone

Would help them. To do something. To know something" (Mamet, p.12).

John's outlook is that educational system is just stylish is mistreating to many people who consider that educational system is significant. Mamet wants to condemn the educational system and he shows how the educational institutions have corrupted by materialism and capitalism. This meaning is clear when John defines the concept of Humanity through his power position, " I know and you don't ", he sees as "exploitation in the educational process". He remains in the dominant position and works within that system as a professor. Carol objects his interpretation when she says, " how can you say in a class. Say in a college class. That college education is prejudice" (Mamet, 1992, P. 31). She basically considers her education as a way to gain her position in the society.

It is also believed that *Oleanna* is Mamet's commentary on the issue of sexual provocation. In fact, Mamet has always tried to question the usual ethics in his contemporary context and it is the reason why his main characters are a university teacher and a student. He wants to communicate the abuse which threatens women in any place. Moreover, When John says "Oh my God". Carol answers " Yes. that's right". He response reveals that all men desire to control over the women by using a violence. In other words, man refuses to admit a risk to his position in the power of structure.

David Mamet has illustrated that *Oleanna* is about power-among other things like fake complaint. Both of the characters try to defeat the other to achieve his / her position in the society. One of the critics, Christine (1995) said that gender became an essential element as when Carol realizes that it possible to use oratorical tactics of sexual policy to gain her position in world of male (p. 205).

Finally, according to Amini and Azizmohammadi (2014), it is worth mentioning that in Mamet's play, the sexed discrimination between Carol and John is not as important as "the power of teacher as a presenter and the weakness of student conduct from their respective and relative status, not from their sex.

In fact, *Oleanna* is only a kaleidoscope of exchanging power relationship laid down through language pattern of predominance, capitulation, and reversal" (p. 465).

Result

Oleanna is Mamet's commentary on the issue of sexual incitement. In fact, Mamet has always tried to question the usual ethics in his contemporary context and it is the reason why his main characters are a university teacher and a student. He wants to communicate the abuse which threatens women in any place. In other words, man refuses to admit a risk to his position in the power of structure. Mamet mainly condemns capitalism, American education system and also tends to the subjects of sexual harassment. Even though Mamet arguing about the relationship between man and woman is criticized by many feminists. he seems to be very accomplished to indicate the deep psychology in both sexes. John who a professor in a university seems superior to his student Carol in terms of his masculinity and academic ability. This superiority is defeated by Carol's proclaim of sexual harassment

Conclusion

This study was a feminism approach towards the analysis of David Mamet's *Oleanna*. It was argued that unlike most of the plays by Mamet, this play tries to show a woman who is fighting very hard to achieve her position in the society . However, she faces a number of difficulties in this regard. It was also said that in most plays by Mamet, the female characters are just doing their domestic roles associated with them by a masculine society. On the other hand, Carol as the leading character in this play is supposed as the most adamant and self-confident female character in all Mamet's plays. Through the feminism approach, the writer concluded that although John seemed to be more powerful in some aspects and points of the play, his power would diminish remarkably at the other points. In fact, although he is a university professor, his outlook towards women is just the same as many other men and it is why he is unable to control

himself at the end and starts beating her violently.

References

- [1] Azizmohammadi, F., & Amini, F. (2014). Judith Butler's Gender and Identity Trouble in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* and *Oleanna*. *European Online Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*, 3 (3), pp. 459-467.
- [2] Bigsby, C. W. E. (1985). *Beyond Broadway*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP. Vol. 3 of *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, 3 vols, 1985.
- [3] Bragg, M. (2001). The South Bank Show. In L. Kane (Ed.), *David Mamet in conversation* (pp. 143-156). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- [4] Case, S. E. (1988). *Feminism and theatre*. New York: Methuen.
- [5] Christine, M. L. (1995) "The Politics of Gender, Language and Hierarchy in Mamet's *Oleanna*." *Journal of American Studies* (P. 205).
- [6] Dekovan, M. (1999). Modernism and gender. In M. Levenson (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to modernism*. (pp. 174-193). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Jacobs, D. H. (2000). Positioning the female in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross*. In L. Kane (Ed.), *David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross: Text and performance* (pp. 107-122). New York: Garland Pub.
- [8] Jacobs, D. H. (1996). "Levene's daughter: Positioning the female in *Glengarry Glen Ross*." In L. Kane (Ed.), *David Mamet's Glengarry Glen Ross: Text and performance* (pp. 107-122). New York: Garland.
- [9] Hall, AC. (1992). Playing to Win: Sexual Politics in David Mamet's *House of Games* and *Speed the Plough*. In *David Mamet: A casebook*. Ed. Leslie Kane. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- [10] Mamet, D. (1992). *Oleanna*, a play. New York: Random House.
- [11] Musse, P. H. (1971). Early sex-role development. In D. A. Goslin (Ed.), *Handbook of socialization theory and research*. (pp. 707-731). Chicago: Rand McNally.
- [12] Piette, A. (2004). The 1980s. In C. W. E. Bigsby (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to David Mamet* (pp. 74-88). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [13] Radavich, D. (1994). "Man among men: David Mamet's homosocial order." In P. E. Murphy (Ed.), *Fictions of masculinity: Crossing cultures, crossing sexualities* (pp. 123-36). New York: New York UP.
- [14] Ryan, S. (1996). *Oleanna*: David Mamet's power play. *Modern Drama*, 39(3): 393.

Authors:

Ahmed Husain Abood has M.A degree in English literature in 2017. Now he is teaching English language in Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Education of Karbala. He is very interested in drama and novel.

Habeeb Lateef Kadhim Al-Qassab has achieved M.A degree in English literature in 2017. He is teaching English language and literature in Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Education of Diwaniyah. He is very interested in drama and poetry.

Elaf Muther Muslim has achieved M.A degree in English literature in 2017. She is teaching English language and literature in Ministry of Education, General Directorate of Education of Diwaniyah. She is very interested in drama, stylistics and novel.