



## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EDWARD ALBEE AND DAVID MAMET

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### ABSTRACT:

Edward Albee and David Mamet have enhanced people's knowledge about their condition through their plays. They have portrayed the horrible consequences of the infiltration of market values in the private lives of the individual.

### KEYWORDS:

**BURGEON CLASS, INERTIA, ILLUSIONS, BUSINESS ETHIC, RESILIENCE, INDIVIDUALISM, SELF-INTEREST, CATHARTIC EFFECT DEMOGRAPHIC INFLUENCE.**

Albee and Mamet have dramatised two different dimensions of contemporary American society in their plays. The complacency of the bourgeois class and the growing alienation of modern man are the focus of Albee's criticism. The compelling inertia and the feeling of indifference among upper class people agonise him. Albee shows them as victims of their ego. The hollowness of false values disturb him and his plays try to strip modern man of his illusions.

Mamet's work presents a different dimension of contemporary American society. He focuses on the aspirations and yearnings of the working class people, for whom the American dream never materialised. Mamet has exposed the hollowness of the American myth of success. He is agonised to see the infiltration of business ethic in private lives. The business ethos itself has under gone a tremendous change during the last few decades. It justifies cut-throat competition in the name of business.

This tendency has made each individual view the other as a territory or an opportunity to be exploited. In essence, fellow human beings have become a commodity for each other. The sentiments of friendship, loyalty and love have lost their importance. There is no resilience in the traditional institutions of marriage and family. All bonds of human relationships seem fragile in contemporary society except the bond of commercial enterprise.

Macleod called the 1960s as "the decade of alienation" (161). According to him, throughout the decade two kinds of alienation were rampant in America. The alienation in the affluent society and the alienation in the non-affluent society. People of neither were happy and satisfied with their situation. The young generation of the bourgeois class itself started questioning the American values of individualism and unbridled pursuit of happiness. According to Charles A. Reich, these values led "to competitiveness, suspicion of others, unbridled self-interest, and corruption of American life" (Qtd. in

Macleod 163). In disgust of their situation many sought refuge in drugs, while others found solace in Eastern religions. In his plays, Albee has portrayed the anguish and frustrations of this young generation. He represents their revolt against the corruption of traditional American values.

The alienation evident in working class people is of another sort. They found themselves systematically excluded from the promised American dream. Mamet's work presents their struggle for money, success and power. They are failures despite their relentless efforts. Mamet depicts their relentless efforts and anger in his plays. Macleod writes in the conclusion of his book that, "it is time to say, "Horatio Alger, farewell. The hallowed dream of millions for everyone who works hard enough is obsolete" (279). He also suggests that "we must stop ranking people as failures if they do not make enough money to become affluent" (280). Today, opportunities are shrinking in America. There is no more frontier or undiscovered land to conquer. The problem of unemployment and livelihood are rampant, particularly in working class people. Mamet dramatises sympathetically the life and belief of non-affluent members of the society. He seems to blame the system rather than the individual for the present unlovable situation.

He criticises the contemporary business ethic of not providing any opportunity to working class people to do well. Similarly, he also tries to shed the illusions of lower echelon of society regarding success.

Albee began his dramatic career in 1960s with the production of *The Zoo Story*. He rediscovered "the moral seriousness of American drama established by O'Neill, Williams, and Miller" (Roundane, "Edward Albee", 1). But his approach is different to these writers. He has depicted social evils in a distorted mirror, providing no readymade solutions. He does not like "message plays". Paolucci points out that such didacticism has "plagued our theatre

since O'Neill" (Tensions to Tonic 3). Albee invokes active interaction of audience to his plays. His work minimizes the actor-audience barrier. In this respect of theatrical strategy, his art resembles "the Pirandellian sense realism on stage, drawing us into play and slowly pulling away the scaffolding that separates us from the core of experience, casting us as participants in the drama" (Paolucci, "Albee and The Modern Stage," 11). Albee believes that the active participation of audience would have a cathartic effect in their real lives.

Albee felt seriously the degradation of human lives in contemporary American society. He found that the basic cause of alienation is the dislocation of values. The substitution of real values by false values is eroding the all genuine feeling. Modern man has lost his capacity to make a distinction between right and wrong, between illusion and reality. Eric Fromm believed, that the human capacity to love "demands a state of intensity, awakens, enhanced vitality, which can only be the result of a productive and active orientation in many other spheres of life" (The Art of Loving, 129). Similarly, Albee believes that the true success of the drama is achieved when "the when audience is bloodied" (Roudane, "playwright speaks." 195). It is his firm belief that sick humanity can be restored to health if it is given the right knowledge of its condition.

In later plays, Albee seems to have lost the hope of recovery. The themes of death and destruction of a civilization which is torn away by a nuclear holocaust dominate his plays. The plays such as Box, Quotation from Chairman Mao TseTung and All Over come in this category. The language, characters and meaning move towards abstraction. The Seascape, which opened in 1975, won him another Pulitzer prize. The play is about life. It reaffirms Albee's confidence in human values.

Mamet began his dramatic in 1970s but received national attention only in the eighties. He belongs to the generation which is commonly called "the baby boom generation". It is the largest generation in American history which consisted of "76 million babies," who were born in the 18 years (1946-64) following the end of world war second (Leepson 37). Leon F. Bouvier and Carol J. De Vita, the noted demographers have pointed out in a recent report published by the private, nonprofit population Bureau that, "when the history of our time is written a century hence, it may well be said that the baby boom was one of the most powerful and enduring demographic influences on this nation" (qtd. in Leepson 37).

Mamet was born in 1947. He passed his young age in the years 1970s and 1980s. This period has been described by Whitehead as the worst phase of individualism:

*It was characterized by greater demographic diversity, a decline in birth rates, accelerating divorce rates, individual and social experimentation, the breakdown of the separate spheres, ideology, the creation of a singles "life style", the idealization of career and work life, and the search for meaning in life through self-expression (30).*

Mamet himself faced the brunt of attenuated relationships. Bouvier and Carol J. De Vita, the noted demographers have pointed out in a recent report published by the private, nonprofit population Bureau that, "when the history of our time is written a century hence, it may well be said that the baby boom was one of the most powerful and enduring demographic influences on this nation" (qtd. in Leepson 37).

His parents were divorced when he was only ten years old. In a beautiful play, Reunion he presents a situation where a daughter meets her father after twenty years with the help of an association called Alcoholic Anonymous. Mamet is sarcastic when he draws this conclusion that their coming together was not out of love but of need.

In the plays, The Sexual Perversity in Chicago and Edmond, Mamet has depicted the fears and loss of trust, as the dominating feelings between men-women relationship in contemporary society. The plays, American Buffalo, Glengarry Glen Ross and Speed-the-Plow portray the corruption of business ethic which in result, has eroded the feeling of community among fellow human beings.

The generation of Albee and Mamet has passed through the trauma of sixties, not as spectators but as participants. They knew the hollowness of a consumptive society. A definite change was visible in people's attitude towards life in the 1980s. The old family ties are reviving as it has been pointed out by Whitehead. "Culturally, it is shifting away from expressive individualism and a fascination with self towards greater attachments to family and commitment to others" (30). The demographers and social writers give credit of this transformation to the baby boom generation. "For the next 20 years", Bouvier and De Vita note, "The baby boom generation will be laying the foundation not only for its own retirement and older years, but also for the nation's future." (qtd. in Leepson 39). Albee and Mamet have contributed substantially to the revival of values in their country. Their plays have played a significant role in the culture of their times.

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