



THE USE OF LANGUAGE IN DAVID MAMET'S PLAYS

Dr. Ali Hasan¹

¹ Lecturer of English, Government College, Malpura(Tonk).

ABSTRACT

David Mamet is considered a language playwright by critics. He pays great attention to the music and rhythm of language in his plays. The simplicity and lyricism of his dialogues are compared to Hemingway. He pays tribute to his Jewish background for it. His father motivated him to read Stanislavsky. Mamet has used abusive language purposefully. He has portrayed characters from working class. They are not much educated. Politeness is not a favourable quality in their profession. Mamet has used language innovatively to express the failure and disappointment of these people.

Key words: Poetic resonance, Innovative language, Verbal cloak, Semantics, Abusiveness, Lower echelon.

The most impressive characteristic of Mamet's plays is his use of language. It is fresh, compact and has poetic resonance. Mamet admits, "if it's not poetic on the stage, forget it. If it's solely serving the interest of the plot, I'm not interested." One critic goes to the extent of saying that in Mamet's plays, "plot in subordinated not so much to character as to the harmonics and dissonances of language". (qtd. in Almansi 198). There is no denying the fact that in Mamet plays the music and rhythm of language is important to the meaning of the play. Jack Kroll was so fascinated by the network of his language that he called him a "Muzak Man." Besides this, he referred to him by several other names such as "a language playwright," "a cosmic eavesdropper who's caught the American aphasia." and "the proverbial tape recorder, picking up speech like lint" ("Muzak Man", 51).

Mamet's use of innovative language has attracted everyone. People were bemused by the accuracy of his language which evokes the atmosphere of its surrounding. In his use of language, Mel Gussow considers Mamet next to Hemingway. He writes, "listening to the simplicity and the lyricism of terse dialogue (never a polysyllable when a monosyllable will do). I realized that not does Mr. Mamet have a kinship with Pinter, but that there is a trace of Hemingway in his art" ("Latest Microcosm", 2:34). Mamet's fascination with language is so intense that he is described a playwright who does not go out without a notebook. He has large cabinet filled up with perhaps forty notebooks of speech and ideas, overheard in pool halls, bars, elevators, ping pong parlours and gambling halls.

Mamet pays a tribute to his father and to his Jewish background which made him aware, in the early childhood, of the rhythm and tone of language. "In my family", Mamet recalls "there was always a large premium on being able to express yourself - if only for purpose of Chicanery" (qtd. in Porterfield 41-42). Through his father, he was interested in semantics, Mamet read Stanislavsky. He was fascinated by the fact that "the way we use language, its rhythm actually determines the way we behave, more than the other way around." Mamet pays tribute to the master craftsman of language in these words. "Everything I am as a Playwright I feel I owe to Stanislavsky I mean Jesus, every playwright should be forced to read him just on consonants and vowels alone." (Wetzsteon, 101).

The interaction with working class people which Mamet had, during the time he undertook different odd jobs, is also a relevant source of persuasive dialogues in his plays. The best of Mamet's plays such as American Buffalo and Glengarry Glen Ross are based on his practical experience. Mamet has used frequently the terms of various trades in his plays. Lakeboat, is full of technical terms related to shipboard activity. The play Glengarry Glen Ross is full of words related to salesmanship.

Some critics have noted the abusiveness in his language. It is true, Mamet has used some of abusive words quite freely. In American Buffalo, Teach appears on the stage calling "fuckin' Rothie" (9). Due to this fact Guido Almansi, called Mamet "a virtuoso of invective" (191)- He added further:

Theatrically, Mamet's plays may not convince everyone, but it would be difficult to deny his prominence as a poet of swearwords, artist of invectives, and virtuoso of obscene expressions. He is the prince of contemporary blasphemers (199).

Mamet has used obscenity for some definite purpose. The remarks he made in connection with his play Sexual Perversity in Chicago are relevant to his use of obscene language. "Voltaire said words were invented to hide feelings. That's what the play is about, how what we say influences what we think". (qtd. in Bigsby, A Critical Introduction, 3: 261). William Herman elaborates the idea that in Mamet's plays "obscenity is constructed in the service of his characters deep need for concealment." (130). Similarly, in her study of contemporary American dramatists, Montushi Chakravartee has referred to Mamet's words as "verbal cloak" which hide inefficiencies, indecisions, doubts and fears of the people. "The use of swearwords suggest a masked virility" of his characters who substitute it for trickery, greed and sexuality (285).

Mamet has dramatised the life, thinking and ambitions of the lower echelon of society. He has drawn characters who are mediocre and losers. Generally, these people do not get the opportunity of good education. One cannot compare the language and manners of these people with those who are brought up in Oxford or Harvard academic circles. Many of his characters are sailors, salesmen and petty thieves. Politeness is not a favourable quality in these professions. They are hardworking rough people, and so is their language. The pursuit of money, power and success are the dominant features of their life. In many cases their efforts are not properly rewarded or are much less than their expectations. There is a rage in their expressions. often it is expressed in abusive language. For example, in American Buffalo, Teach says, "they treat me like an asshole, they are an asshole" (11). It is also Mamet's belief that people speak in the same fashion as his characters when they are relaxed and are not engaged in public dealings. Bigsby has rightly commented that, "few playwrights have paid more attention to language, to the force of dramatic metaphor, to structure or to character as expression of psychological or social dislocation" (Mamet, 13).

Mamet's relentless pursuit of social criticism has won him the title of "a poet of loss" (252) and "a mordant poet of modernity" (Bigsby 287). Some critics have bestowed upon him the mantle "the Albee of the 1980s". Albee himself has acknowledged Mamet's command of native idioms in these words, "Mamet had a fine ear, but there was as yet no evidence of a fine mind" (Cohn 46).

Critics find in his work, the resemblance to most successful writers of the time such as Earnest Hemingway, H.L. Mencken, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. In an interview with David Savran he has added the name of Lanford Wilson in this list. Mamet acknowledges the tremendous influence of Pinter's revue sketches on him. He says, "Beckett and Pinter- of course I'm influenced by them. If you are in modern dance how could you not be influenced by Martha Graham?" (qtd. in Gussow, "Daring Visions," 2:13).

Mamet has used language innovatively to express the inner feelings. His characters are in struggle with the existing systems. They are enable to achieve success. Mamet's sympathy lies with these people. He has criticised the system and the beliefs which prompted them to act in this way. His language reciprocates their thinking and action. The frustration and anger of these people are portrayed vividly in his plays.

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