

## Chapter One:

Feminist Representation of the 1960s and 1970s American Society in David Mamet's

### *Oleanna*

This dissertation analyzes the effect over the characters in *Oleanna* who are the representatives of 1960s and 1970s American society. It studies the 1960s and 1970s American society where people were guided by individualistic and capitalistic nature which extended to radical feminism. *Oleanna*, through the characters John and Carol, envisions the new ethos which had arisen in the American society. The major characters, John and Carol represent the society and the people living in that period. John is a professor while Carol is just an under average student who goes to John to improve her grades. As we go further into the play, we see that John and Carol are, in some way, striving for mutual understanding. But failing to achieve understanding, they strive for power. The Practice of individualism and capitalism during 1960s and 70s in American society depicted through the activities of the characters John and Carol led the then American society to failure.

The language and the situation in this play is wholly American. The transformation in values from the mid-sixties to the late seventies confronts us with one of the sharpest discontinuities in the cultural history. The rise in capitalism and individualism, extreme feminism and the change in pedagogy were seen in the contemporary society which can be seen in *Oleanna*. John, who is the representative of American pedagogy, teaches his student Carol all the essence which ultimately made Carol an immoral being. The new American values had made Carol an extreme feminist, which made her take John as her enemy. America had adopted the new culture of self-expressiveness where a higher value was placed on forms of choice and

individualism that express one's unique nature. Carol also adopted this culture, and she accused John of sexual harassment.

This thesis shows the changed American society values. This society was guided by self-centeredness and capitalistic value which is reflected by the character Carol. Carol seemed fallen down from her morality and guided by feminist principles because of which she sees John as her enemy. John is just a part of an educational system who teaches Carol the ethos of the contemporary American society. But this ethos makes Carol change her concept towards being an individual and makes her an immoral character. The pedagogical system taught Carol the essence of capitalism and individualism which makes her an extreme feminist. This changed Carol now seems a threat to the contemporary American society who could bring the downfall of many individuals like John.

Borrowing the ideas from Michel Foucault's "New Historicism", this research explores the main aspects that underwent during the 1960s and 1970s America. Furthermore, this project focuses on the impact of such changes upon the society and for the upcoming generation.

The characters of the drama *Oleanna* depict the American society of 1960s and 1970s where the characters show their expressive and individualistic nature. This new ethos gave priority to the expressive side of life even at the expense of economic benefits. American individualism focused mainly on the political domain-freedom to speak our mind, to pursue our religious beliefs, to live where we choose. But this ethos fails them to conduct their life properly and ultimately leads to failure.

In *Oleanna*, Mamet portrays the characters such as John and Carol who are ready to tear one another apart keeping then in the right place than the other. John shows his capitalistic nature in the pedagogy while Carol shows her individualistic as

well as self-centered nature. Carol is forgetting what it means to be an individual, to be a self and John is unaware about the harm that could occur in teaching-learning process.

The main objective of this study is to explore the American society of the 1960s and 1970s when the society underwent a lot of changes. Through critical analysis it brings out the inner truth about that period where people had changed their views about themselves and also towards others.

Although the major objective of this research is to depict the changes, it does not offer the reason behind it. This research does not offer a broad study of the American society. Given the nature of research, time and resources, this study neither explores the various movements that took place during that period.

## Chapter Two:

The Changed American Values during 1960s and 70s; its effect depicted through the characters of *Oleanna*

The social changes in America in the 1960s and 1970s named The New Right issues called for a return to family values, a nationalism bordering xenophobia, the reconstitution of the American community- a “community” defined more on the basis of exclusion than inclusion- and a revalorization of capitalism through privileging the vigorous competition of an entrepreneurial economic order. The transformation in values from the mid-sixties to the late seventies confronts us with one of the sharpest discontinuities in American cultural history. The changed values revolve around the twin issues of the roles that “expressiveness” and “individualism” play in people’s lives. The new ethos gave priority to the expressive side of life even at the expense of morality. By the end of the 1970s, the majority of Americans assimilated that self-expressiveness was too important for artists and writers to monopolize: everyone should have the opportunity to develop their inner potential for self expression. The drama *Oleanna* is geared towards this new American culture. Carol had turned up to be individualistic character where she had brought the downfall of her professor, John. Carol had become the reason of John’s destruction. The self-centeredness nature of Carol has made her immoral because of which she had placed less value on observing society’s rules. Though, John was a professor, she showed no respect and dignity towards him. Her expressive nature placed a higher value on forms of choice and individualism that express one’s unique inner nature.

The new values that emerge during the 1960's and 1970's influence American pedagogy. Even the educational institutions get influenced by the new values. The whole nation learns the value of “expressiveness” and “individualism” and so does

John as a professor teaches his student, Carol. John, who represents the American pedagogic system, teaches Carol, the American ethics of the contemporary period which later backfires on John. In the confrontation between the professor and the student, Mamet dramatizes the unexpected effects when ideology installs at the heart of the institution that, perhaps more than any other, determines the content of the nation's cultural core-the university. University is the place from where the nation's value and culture is taught. But *Oleanna* depicts the university as a battlefield on which the forces of culture confront the forces of anarchy. We can see the power struggle between a teacher and a student in order to prove them right. *Oleanna* ultimately explores the threat of inferior teaching and the subsequent misreading that necessarily follow in a pedagogical environment that silently reinforces hierarchical differences amongst its participants. This is more a play about teaching, reading and understanding: how to do these things well and the consequences of doing them poorly.

The play was written in the wake of the anti feminism movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when the predominant mindset, mainstream culture, and popular politics of the nation had moved significantly to the right, and feminism was being blamed for societal ills ranging from the breakdown of the traditional family to the nation's increased drug use and higher crime rates. Conservatives espoused Arcadian return to a time when gender roles were clear and society was better for it. Within this environment, Mamet's play was often held up by the so-called New Right as exemplifying just how far liberals would go in their attempts to force an artificial tolerance of diversity and unhealthy leveling of hierarchies into the various public arenas. Carol is regarded as a feminist where the play has constructed her in such one sided negative terms that no genuine debate about the merits of her

position is necessary or even possible. She has become like a monster straight out of men's worst nightmares. She had made John her enemy and led him to his downfall. The feminist Carol trapped John by turning his words against him.

David Mamet is a Jewish writer, though until recently few accounts of his life or work suggested as much, except in so far as they sketched in his early years. Mamet has been discussed primarily in terms of his distinctive linguistic facility, his fascination with the brittle relationship between the sexes, the figure of the confidence trickster, his concern with the moral vacuity at the heart of much experience. All these things are clearly observable in his plays. Since its publication, *Oleanna* has received many critical responses. Mamet represents the postmodern realities of the world. In the plays of David Mamet, he problematizes the possibility of making objective judgment and thereby questions the very foundation of the realistic conventions that the audience seems to espouse. To understand Mamet, however, one must realize that his playwriting approach is to challenge the audience with such unresolved lacunae. Matthew C. Roudane, in *American Drama since 1960*, has given an analysis of *Oleanna*:

“Mamet returns to a world in which the gaps between words and deeds remain. The play is theatrically powerful precisely because its author never fills in such gaps. Instead, the theatergoer thinks, Is Carol framing John? Are her accusations legitimate? Is Carol simply the first to have courage to challenge a patronizing and, perhaps, womanizing male teacher? Is John so much a part of an inherently misogynistic world that he is blithely unaware that his well-meaning actions are in fact highly sexist? Mamet invites the audience to respond to these and many other issues...” (173).

Mamet's characters are not like they seem to be. Readers have to use their intellect to find who the characters really are. In this play some readers may go with Carol while some may go with John. Mamet is not in support of any of the characters but he leaves it for the readers to decide who the actual victim is.

David Kennedy Sauer says "the objective reality of the characters in *Oleanna* cannot be seen except through one framework or another-so it is one's own framework that one confronts when watching the play" (427). He further explains:

"Attempts to interpret *Oleanna* by the standards and approaches of modernism can lead to frustration. Limiting critical choices to the simple either/or of modernism ambiguity results in the critic's having to choose between Carol and John and to build a case around one choice. But the ambivalence of indeterminacy requires that much greater space be left open in interpreting the postmodern work. Characters' motives are not fully knowable, as they are in the resealed-secret form of modernist realism- *The Children's Hour*, for example. And the interpreter must recognize that postmodern characters are not fully knowable. If the critic can accept this fact, then a different kind of appreciation of the art of dramatist will result" (433).

Plays written by Mamet seem to give space for the actors to make choice as Mamet writes his plays in regards to postmodernism. In postmodernism the characters of the play are unpredictable. The characters do not appear the same as they appear in the play. The perspective of the readers keeps on changing looking at the characters. Not only has that it also left space for the readers and the viewers to perceive a larger view than that of the more didactic, single-minded reader.

Another critic Verna A. Foster sees *Oleanna* through the lens of educational system. She is with the view in *Sex, Power and Pedagogy in David Mamet's Oleanna*:

“Mamet’s play is less an antifeminist statement than it is an indictment of the educational culture in which...power-roles and power-games played by both professors and student make teaching destructive and learning impossible” (37).

Teacher and student relationship have been misread by the very concept of power and hierarchy in the play. Because of this concept the place like a university has become a battle field where both- teacher and student show their power upon each other.

Regarding the same issue of power and hierarchy Christine MacLeod says that:

“As a feminist who is also a university teacher, my own view is that the narrow critical preoccupation with sexual harassment, political correctness and beleaguered masculinity in *Oleanna* has what is in fact a far wider and more challenging dramatic engagement with issues of power, hierarchy and the control of language. I am led to this conclusion by various routes, but the starting point, necessarily, must be my first experience of the play in performance” (202).

Universities are supposed to be the house of knowledge where the exchange of many things takes place. But in the play Mamet has used university as a place to exercise power and hierarchy where teachers and students are facing each other as their opponents. According to Henry Giroux:

“Rather than reinforcing and reproducing these power relations, the university must provide the conditions for students to engage in cultural remapping as a form of resistance. Students should be given the opportunity to engage in systematic analyses of the ways in which

the dominant culture creates , and saturated in terror, inequality, and forced exclusions...that have disabled others to speak in the places where those who have power exercise authority” (33).

Giroux is with the idea that universities should teach the students the way of living. It should provide the students with the skills and art to live in the society where all the discrimination and suppression takes place by the people who are in power. Such kind of places should produce a new generation who can speak in favor of the voiceless people. But Mamet in the play has failed to show this and has used this learning place as an open field to practice power and position. The audience takes Carol as the immoral character who accuses her professor of sexual harassment. How could one be so morally down and make such cruel accusation? Both the characters lack mutual understanding and show their power which takes this play to a tragic end.

As this play was written in the time when feminism was highly in practice, female voice was given priority, we can also see Carol using her feminist view in order to bring her professor down. According to the review made by Kimball King in *South Atlantic Review*, she says:

“Many astute female critics of my acquaintance were offended by what they perceived as a misogynistic, anti-political correctness diatribe on Mamet’s part. On the surface, it would seem as if the protagonist, John, was unfairly victimized by his student, Carol and the sinister “group” which she claims is guiding her” (156).

Carol, as she becomes an extreme feminist, sees John as her enemy and in every way goes against him. She is said to be guided by her “group” who may be a group of feminists, pushing Carol to go against the professor. In the play, Carol has used her

feminist power in order to fulfill her desire which shows the individualistic nature in her.

Besides this, the play basically highlights the pedagogic system of the contemporary American society and the values in which this system runs. In this matter Christopher William Edger Bigsby gives his view that “*Oleanna* points out some of the most basic failures of American education and the long-term effects of the damage it does to young people” (124). He further explains that –“although Mamet resists the idea that the play is primarily about education, there is no doubt that it is intended to contribute to a growing body of dramatic works that expose the power dynamics of the student-teacher relationship and the abuse to which it is prone”(125).

Going beyond these perspectives, this research assumes that Mamet’s *Oleanna* is the representation of ‘the hidden truth’ or ‘other side’ of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. He brings forth the changes that took place in the American society under the influence of the New Right where capitalism, individualism and feminism were in highlight. In *Oleanna*, Carol represents the American society which had brought a lot of changes in it. Her capitalistic and individualistic nature had made her see knowledge as a means only to upgrade her status in the class. To fulfill this, she even made her professor guilty in front of the tenure committee. Her feminist nature had brought John to the state of being expelled from his job. The accusation of sexual harassment made by Carol was truly the misuse of feminist power and was led by capitalistic nature. To support my argument and hypothesis, this research borrows the theoretical propositions from new historicism.

New historicism is a literary criticism that has emerged since the 1980s. The term new historicism was initiated by Stephen Greenblatt but it was Michel Foucault who helped it to shape it as a literary critical practice. It looks into the text

determining its form and content through the specific historical contexts and cultural conditions. It searches the meaning of the text in regards with the existing ideas and assumption of the contemporary historical period. In other words, new historicism goes into the text and looks it through the dimension of the historical moment which had been forgotten or not been expressed.

New historicism does not simply look into the text and relates it with the past, but it also does the necessary changing of the text with regards to its history. In the book *Practicing New Historicism*, Stephen Greenblatt and coauthor Catherine Gallagher explain this same issue as:

“Out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, the identification of units suitable for analysis is problematized. If every traces of a culture are part of a massive text, how can one identify the boundaries of these units? What is the appropriate scale? There are, we conclude, no abstract, purely theoretical answers to these questions. To a considerable extent the units are given by the archive itself-that is, we almost always receive works whose boundaries have already been defined by the technology and generic assumptions of the original makers and readers. But new historicism undertakes to call these assumptions into question and treat them as part of the history that needs to be interpreted” (14-15).

New historicism suggests that the text needs to be redefined while relating them to the part of history. All the text that is literary or non-literary is situated in a particular time and place; it has many things to do with the reality of the society. Thus, a text cannot be isolated from its history and only be defined in the close boundaries.

New historicism believes that we have clear access to every fact of history, of how they fit within the complex web of competing ideologies and conflicting social, political, and cultural agendas of the time and place in which they occurred. For new historicists, these aspects become strictly a matter of interpretation, not fact. Even when traditional historians believe they are sticking to the facts, the way they contextualize those facts determines what story those facts will tell. Furthermore, new historicists argue that reliable interpretations are, for a number of reasons, difficult to produce.

To a new historicist, history is not objective knowledge which can be made to explain a literary text. It is a secure knowledge which a literary critic can use to fix a text's meaning.

New historicism is a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for text of all kinds. As a critical practice, it treats literary texts as a space where power relations are made visible. Michael Foucault's ideas have strongly influenced the development of new historicism; power circulates in all direction, to and from all social levels, at all times. All-pervasive nature of power that is cited in the book *The Foucault Primer: Discourses, power and the Subject* by Alec Mc Houll and Wendy Grace states:

“Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere...power comes from below; that is there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between ruler and ruled at the root of power relation and serving as a general metric- no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. One must suppose rather that the manifold relations of force that takes shape and come

into play in the machinery of production, limited groups, and institutions, are the basic for wide ranging effects that run through the social body as a whole” (39).

Foucault attempts to discover the ‘rules’ of a particular discourse period, and then relate them to the study of knowledge and power. His enterprise is essentially to historicize discourse and to textualize history. Foucault refuses to see history in terms of linearity and development. Rather, he sees it in terms of a kind of synchronic power struggle. Power for Foucault is not necessarily a repressive, tyrannical thing; it is a generative, productive force. Power is that which binds together the disparate forces of a society. No event stems from a single, coherent cause, but is the product of a vast network of signification and ‘power’.

To sum up, for new historical literary critics the literary text through its representation of human experience at a given time and place, is an interpretation of history. As such, the literary text maps the discourse circulating at the time it was written and is itself one of those discourses. That is, the literary text was shaped by the discourse circulating in the culture in which it was produced.

*Oleanna* can thus be seen through the perspective of new historicism where the text is seen wearing the lenses of 1960s and 1970s American society. This dissertation will revisit the contemporary period and the respective impact on the text. As new historicism revisits the past and also defines the text with regard to the past, so shall this research will do. New historicists’ approach can be as analytical tool to research David Mamet’s *Oleanna* by revisiting and revising the 1960s and 1970s America. Mamet especially uses the new ethos of the contemporary period that brought changes in people and nation as a whole to present the new aspects of America.

David Mamet's *Oleanna* revisits the 1960s and 1970s period and explores the situation of American society when the society was influenced by self-centeredness and feminism. He brings forth the nasty changes and the impact of New Rights in the contemporary period. During that time feminism as well as gender roles were clear and society was better for it. Within this environment, Mamet's play was often held up by the so-called New Right as exemplifying just how far liberals would go in their attempts to force an artificial tolerance of diversity and unhealthy leveling of hierarchies into various public arenas.

In *Oleanna*, Mamet depicts the 1960s and 1970s from the perspective of American society. The enormous success of the New Right brought a lot of changes in the contemporary time including some cultural changes as well. In "The New Obscurity", Jurgen Habermas defines this displacement as:

"Constitutive of the neoconservative ideology that shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society.... [The New Right] does not uncover the economic and social causes for the altered attitudes towards work, consumption, achievement and leisure.

Consequently, [it] attributes [legitimation crisis] to the domain culture" (7).

This transformation in values confronts us with one of the sharpest discontinuities in American cultural history. American society adopted the new ways of looking at life, individual as well as education.

Through several instances, Mamet discloses this bitter reality of the contemporary American society. Carol freely admits that she sees education as a means for attaining the social mobility that will allow her to rise above her lower class

origins. Rather than defining ‘a love of learning’ as an integral part of the humanist ideal of the ethically good life, she views knowledge as a good only to the extent that it can alter her status and advance the interest of class empowerment. She identifies herself as one of the “people who came here [to the university] to know something they did not know....To get, what do they say? To get on in the world” (7). Here, Mamet presents Carol like students who see the place of knowledge through the lenses of capitalism. With such concept of students, we can imagine it could affect the whole nation.

Implicitly rebuking Carol’s willingness to use education as a means of furthering her social aspirations, John obscures the extent to which, by participating in the cultural (re)production of class identity, that university engages in objectifying the class difference and antagonisms that manifest themselves precisely in the economic “prejudices” and “humiliations” that Carol desire to escape. While such “prejudices” work against those “aspiring to the vast new middle class”, the university empowers those who, like John, already belong to that class. John’s motivations for seeking tenure reveal his own desire for an empowerment that is as much material as it is ideological. John says:

“That I had duties beyond the school, and that my duty to my home, for instance, was, or should be, of an equal weight. That tenure, and security, and yes, and comfort ... were even worthy of honorable pursuit. And that it was given me ... to assure myself of- as far as it rests in The Material- a continuation of that joy and comfort. In exchange for... teaching” (44).

Carol as well as John both has been the victim of the capitalist ethos which had emerged during that period. They have been forced to see education as the source to

uplift their economic status. This is what the culture of the contemporary time has taught them. According to Lois Tyson:

“We cannot understand a historical event, object, or person in isolation from the web of discourse in which it was represented because we cannot understand it in isolation from the meanings it carried at that time. The more we isolate it, the more we will tend to view it through the meanings of our own time and place and, perhaps, our own desire to believe that the human race is improving with the passage of time” (286).

Mamet in *Oleanna* is trying to show the reality of the contemporary American society where the people were very much capitalistic and self-centered. They saw everything through the lenses of materialism and economic benefit and so did John and Carol. Instead of taking education as source to increase knowledge, Carol takes it as a means to grow her social standard while John looks a university as a place to fulfill his personal desire.

Unlike Carol, John offers a brief account of the decline and fall of the American universities:

“I say college education, since the war has become so a matter of course, and such a fashionable necessity, for those either of or aspiring to the vast new middle class, that we espouse it, as a matter of right, and have ceased to ask, “What is it good for?” (19).

John’s comments encapsulate Mamet’s sense of the degeneration of American culture. In other words, for John, education is an object in itself whose goodness demands that we view education as an end rather than a means.

It is clear that John and Carol have two separate perspectives towards education. Carol looks at education through the perspective of capitalism where she wants to increase her grades to show the society while John is a follower of American education system. There is a difference in the nature of these two characters which is shaped by the contemporary time.

In the book “*The Foucault Reader*”, Michel Foucault explains :

“It is not by studying human nature that linguists discovered the laws of consonant mutation, or Freud the principles of the analysis of dreams, or cultural anthropologists the structure of myths. In the history of knowledge the notion of human nature seems to me mainly to have played the role of ... designat[ing] certain types of discourse in relation to or in opposition to theology or biology or history” (4).

Hence, it is clear that because of their nature, the two characters had a different perception towards education. Their perception was indeed affected by the changes that the society had experienced during the contemporary period and their individual nature.

In America, period of changes came during the 1960's and 1970's. As most of the Americans favored individualism, they became tired of social struggle; they became tired of losing money. They had been working together for common interests. Now, many wanted to spend more time on their own personal interests. This change appeared in many parts of American society. It affected popular culture, education and politics. Many Americans believed that more education only created unequal classes of people. When Carol says “How can I go back and tell them the grades that I...” (6), it becomes clear that she has to face the problem of inferiority with the students who shall bring higher grades than her. She further adds that-

“Any of it. Any of it. I’m smiling in class; I’m smiling, the whole time. What are you talking about? What is everyone talking about? I don’t understand. I don’t know what it means. I don’t know what it means to be here...you tell me I’m intelligent, and then you tell me I should not be here, what do you want with me? What does it mean? Who should I listen to...? I...” (Oleanna, 21)

The failures of American education since the 1960s and 1970s- as compounded dramatically by administrative actions in the 1980s- are far too general to be blamed on the political, sociological, and educational demands of the present moment, whatever their virtues. Even enemies of affirmative action must recognize the failings of America.

Carol has been the victim of the educational system of America. She is struggling and very much confused about running her education and life in general. Although fairly young, she is professional in shameless immoral set-ups and tricks. Carol seems to be annoyed of her status in her studies while she also indirectly blames her professor when she says:

No, you’re right. “Oh, hell.” I failed. Flunk me out of it. It’s garbage.

Everything I do. “The ideas contained in this work express the author’s feelings.” That’s right. That’s right. I know I’m stupid. I know I am.

(Pause) I know what I am, Professor. You don’t have to tell me.

(Pause) It’s pathetic. Isn’t it? ( Oleanna, 9).

This changed Carol seemed a threat for the society as she distorted the essence of individualism as used for personal benefit. Such was the victim of the American pedagogy during that time.

To add this point, the instances of inappropriate behavior serve to foreground the degree of John's commitment to his chosen profession, his level of regard for the system of higher education of which he is a part, and the nature of his relationship with the specific academic institution that provides his livelihood. For instance, John responds to Carol's expression of confusion about his book for the course wherein he is her instructor- with the statement: "Well, perhaps, it's not well written" (11). He then reacts to Carol's fear that she will fail the course with the flippant remark that "it's just a course, it's just a book" (12). Later, John goes so far as to denounce whole facets of education, declaring that to "learn, study, [and] retain is nothing but garbage" (16) and that tests are "nonsense" (23). He refers to the committee that is currently reviewing his performance at the university in order to extend him tenure as "a joke", and of its members, he tells Carol flatly, "I wouldn't employ [them] to wax my car" (23).

John is simply representing the pedagogical system that existed in the contemporary American society. This very nature of representation can be seen through new historicism when Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt in *Practicing New Historicism* argue:

"New historicists linked anecdote to the disruption of history as usual, not to its practice: the undisciplined anecdote appealed to those of us who wanted to interrupt Big Stories. Anecdotes would open history so that literary texts could find new points of insertion" (51).

In *Oleanna* too Mamet depicts the original American educational system where the system was falling and the failure of the system was seen clearly. Not less dangerous are the deviations that John as failures in education go into to compensate for their

lack of good education. It is “tragically” funny how John praises and justifies stupidity and failure;

"All right..... (Pause) I came late to teaching. And I found it Artificial. The notion of “I know and you do not”; and I saw an exploitation in the education process. I told you. I hated school, I hated teachers. I hated everyone who was in the position of a “boss” because I knew- I didn’t think; I knew I was going to fail. Because I was a fuckup. I was just no goddamned good. When I ... late in life...(Pause) When I got out from under... when I worked my way out of the need to fail. When I..." ( Oleanna, 22).

This bitter fact of the contemporary educational system was highlighted by Mamet. But this educational system had brought about a negative change among the people. This pedagogy taught the people all the new ethos of the contemporary society which was later brought into practice.

As the new ethos brought a sudden change in the society, so was feminism brought into practice. The individualistic and capitalistic nature had given way to feminism. As Carol had both this nature in her, she looked at John as her enemy and learned how to empower herself in the process of the action. In Act two, we meet a “new’ Carol: outspoken, serious, to the point, and tough:

“Professor, I came here as a favor. At your personal request. Perhaps, I should not have done so. But I did. On my behalf, and on behalf of my group. And you speak of the tenure committee, one of whose members is a woman, as you know. And though you might call it Good Fun, or An Historical Phrase, or An Oversight, or, all of the above, to refer to the committee as Good Men and True, it is a demeaning remark. It is a

sexist remark, and to overlook it is to countenance continuation of that method of thought” (Oleanna 50-51).

So, Carol is already empowered by her own smartness as a representative of her group. She obviously has done her homework in trapping John for a considerable time before coming to office. This nature of Carol was asked by the society of the time which the pedagogy had taught the society. Carol thus represents the culture where feminism was brought into practice, According to Lois Tyson:

“Personal identity- like historical events, texts, and artifacts- is shaped by and shapes the culture in which it emerges. Thus, cultural categories such as normal and abnormal, sane and insane, are matters of definition. Put another way, our individual identity consists of the narratives we tell ourselves, and we draw the material for our narratives from the circulation of discourse that constitutes our culture” (290).

For Tyson, our individual identity is not merely a product of society. Neither is it merely a product of our own individual will and desire. Instead, individual identity and its cultural milieu inhabit, reflect and define each other. Carol was also the victim of the culture that was being practiced in the contemporary society. Consequently, she had become a feminist and had to use her feminist power upon her professor.

During the period of the 1960s and 1970s, feminist movement was being highlighted. The rise of capitalism and individualism had given a way to feminism as well. Carol develops a great desire to destroy John. Reporting John to the court and Tenure Committee was exactly Carol’s and her group’s decision even before her first visit to his office. For this she accepts John’s invitation to his office and what goes on during the meeting was a pre-emptive set-up by her and her group. What happens

later leaves no doubt that her only purpose is to collect more, real, and fabricated pieces of evidence enough to officially condemn John, and ultimately annihilate him academically, socially and psychologically. John has had little or no chance to escape the conspiracy.

Carol's power over her professor can be explained with Foucault's assertion about power as not the privilege of the dominant class; rather coming from innumerable points in the society through which it circulates and thus, functions in the form of chain. Foucault argues that power is exercised through a net-like organization in which individuals are the vehicles. In *Discipline and Punish*, he says power is:

“Exercised rather than possessed; it is not the “privilege”, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions- an effect that is manifested and sometimes extended by the position of those who are dominated. Furthermore, this power is not exercised simply as an obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”; it invests them, is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them. This means that these relations go right down into the depths of society, that they are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes” (26-27).

Foucault's observation that power is extended and transmitted by the dominated who, subsequently resist to the grip of the pressure the power holders exert upon them is one of the key points in his theory of power. Carol correctly assumes that John views her in a singularly unflattering manner. But this power is resisted by Carol as she along with her group wants to ban John's book. When John starts to say something

about, “Academic freedom...”, Carol cuts him off. She says, “Someone chooses the books. If you can choose them, others can” (74), and she admits, “You have an agenda, we have an agenda” ( Oleanna 74).

In view of the fact that the exertion of power engenders resistance, Foucault asserts that power relations are productive, since the dominant forces produce their counterpoints- new perspectives, divergent discourses and “new forms of behavior” (Mills 33). Mamet portrays the hierarchical power between a teacher-student relationship where Carol underscores the damning nature of the evidence against John and draws his attention to the leverage, she wields as the result of her newly acquired position of power.

The explanation for Carol’s metamorphosis is that she or the people that she calls her group have “planted” her in John’s class to exploit his vulnerability, in which case she might have been inventing imbecility in the first act in order to trick the professor into making statements that can subsequently be twisted into evidence against him. However, among multiple statements, one statement that she makes in the entire play hints at any premeditation on Carol’s part:

“I saw you. I saw you, Professor. For two semesters sit there, stand there and exploit our, as you thought, ‘paternal prerogative’, and what is that but rape... You ask me why I came. I came here to instruct you” (67).

These lines, which occur during the last scene of the play, reflect how Carol’s group has bestowed new concept upon her. Carol believes that simply using these words like “paternal prerogative” and “rape” at John will shatter all his rationalistic defenses.

The feminist nature of Carol can be thus, seen in *Oleanna* where Mamet portrays the history in his play. *Oleanna* complicates every version of history it

presents, individualism, failing of American pedagogy and feminism. History is obviously gendered in *Oleanna*. Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher in *Practicing New Historicism* argue:

“From the beginning we thought it was crucially important to have it both ways: we wanted to delve as deep as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures and at the same time we wanted to understand how certain products of these cultures could seem to possess certain independence. In our scholarship, the relative position of text and context often shift, so that what has been the mere background makes a claim for the attention that has hitherto been given only to the foreground and privileged work of art, yet we wish to know how the foregrounding came out” (16).

Carol frequently constructs competing version of American history where they faced corruption in education. Carol and her so called group has made the university a battle place where Carol and John have to face each other and are battling for power. In this regard Carol is using her feminist power over John and he loses his tenure and all related benefits and Carol gets more corrupted by her nasty plan to destroy John.

The world of *Oleanna* is the world of the most dangerous and perplexing problem ever, the corruption in Education. With only one professor and one student, *Oleanna* is an extremely intricate “jungle” of complexities. Power, sex and education are mingled. Carol resorts to “sex” to penetrate the long-term established corrupted educational system and then attack it. She is aware that John is protected by the “status quo” (56) which unless shattered, would grant him the tenure. What greatly helps Carol is John’s vulnerability. Carol has been taking note of John’s behavioral

violation for two semesters. Eventually, she finds an appropriate time to strike at John, as we see:

(He goes over to her and puts his arm around her shoulder.)

No! (She walks away from him.)

John: Sshhhh.

Carol: No, I don't under...

John: Sshhhhh.

Carol: I don't know what you're saying...

John: Sshhhhh. It's all right.

Carol: ...I have no...

John: Sshhhhh. Sshhhhh. Let it go a moment. (Pause) Sshhhh...let it go. (Pause) Just let it go. (Pause) Just let it go. It's all right. (Pause)

Sshhhhh. (Pause) I understand... (Pause) What do you feel?

The way John presents himself in front of Carol gave her a way to make pre-planned attack on John so that Carol could see his downfall. Even though John did not have sexual intension, because of the feminine nature, Carol was forced to see such behavior of John as sexual harassment and thus accused him in front of the Tenure Committee.

Mamet's work asserts the importance of a return to nature, metaphorical above all to personal enlightenment. It implies that the individual formed by contemporary society incarnates conflict, since the values Carol adopts from capitalistic society obscures and represses inner morality. Specifically, her desire to make her professor lose his tenure is reflected when she accuses him of sexual harassment in the following extract:

Carol: I thought you knew.

John: What. (Pause) What does it mean? (Pause)

Carol: You tried to rape me. (Pause) According to the law..... (Pause)

John: ...what...?

Carol: You tried to rape me. I was leaving this office; you “pressed” yourself into me. You “pressed” your body into me.

John: ...I...

Carol: My Group has told your lawyer that we may pursue criminal charges.

Moreover, Carol’s use of language upon John symbolizes the feminist power that had arisen in the contemporary society. John Brannigan in *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* writes:

“Constructing the spiritual self in counterpoint to capitalist and postmodern society, Mamet metaphorizes it as nature. At the same time, however, he presents the barrier to it through themes evoking nature. In this way, he shows the true persona as a function of inner animality itself, the spiritual as emanating from the material” (138).

Mamet in *Oleanna* focuses on how the materialistic and the capitalistic world had shaped the individual which is portrayed by Carol. Carol’s nature is defined by the contemporary society in which she had a part of. The nature of the society is represented by Carol in the play.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the teacher is often portrayed as a role model, a model of managing sexuality in professional realms, as well as of embodied knowledge; perhaps the teacher is even a parental model. More often than teachers of history or other humanities, Dana Polan observes, English professors are depicted as

“professors of desire”, because they are understood as embodying a subject matter both physical and intimate (235). Polan claims:

“Most of us ignore this fetal attraction to the parent-teacher, bodies may seem evident...[R]eigning philosophies of pedagogy all too often take embodiment to be a secondary, contingent, extricable, non-determinant aspect of education: knowledge is knowledge, a radiant conveyance of thought that is so strong, so inspiring, so integral, that its generally reaches its goal no matter how seemingly ineffective the specific vehicle (i.e. the specific embodied teacher) might appear to be “ (236).

The concept towards a teacher was not similar to what we see a teacher in this age.

There is a vast difference the way we see a teacher and the way the past saw a teacher according to the above statement. The non- literary discourses also see the teacher as Polan had described. Literary and non-literary texts go hand in hand. New historicism advocates for the parallel reading of the historical and non-historical texts. In Louis Montrose’s words:

“The post structuralist’s orientation to history concerns with the historicity of the text and textuality of history. By the historicity of the text, I mean to suggest the historical specificity, the social and material embedding, of all modes of writing- including not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them; thus, I mean to suggest the historical, social, and material embedding of all modes of reading. By textuality of histories, I mean to suggest, in the first place, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, to material

existence that is unmediated by the textual traces of the society in question” (New Historicisms, 410).

Montrose argues that historical discourse must be taken into consideration with the literature produced in the same era as there exists no authentic past as such. This can be related to the title of the play *Oleanna*. This play is named after a 19<sup>th</sup> century community created in Pennsylvania called Oleanna after its founder named Ole Bull and Anna (when put together it is Oleanna). Ole Bull wanted to make his mark on the US so he bought eleven thousand acres of land in Potter County as a settlement for Norwegian immigrants. This land, however, was unsuitable for farming so the community failed and shortly after its founding in the 1850s, it was vacated. This story is also a folk song by Pete Seeger in which it depicts *Oleanna* as a utopian escape with no worries.

David Mamet’s works are normally postmodern, and, as a result, there are often substantial misunderstandings of his plays, as they are read in the wrong context. For Mamet, as a representative postmodern, there is no weighting of inner over outer; indeed, Mamet requires his actors to abandon any attempt to imply some inner depths- they should simply stick to the surface. In his book “*A Student Guide to Play Analysis*” David Rush states that “essentialism does not work” (262) in postmodernism. He further says :

“The nature of reality is not found in the substance of things. There are no essentials; a chair can never be the same for all of us because we are different people. We can never truly remove connotations.

Furthermore, trying to find the essence of some ideas is to cheat them: What, for instance, would you label as the essence of woman, or truth, or beauty? It can’t be done” (262).

There is no full revelation of the buried secrets so that the audience feels it knows the full truth as it has been interpreted by reading the signs all along. In the beginning the spectator takes the play *Oleanna* to be about a womanizer professor who is professional in seducing female students through trapping them to come to his office under the ploy of tutoring them. But the very complicated and difficult-to-answer embedded questions in the play are: Is this education all about? Is this why parents send their daughters to schools? Is this why professors get their PhDs? Is this why America or any other country establishes universities? These questions the play puts are not merely sympathetically moral ones.

Mamet does not tread into unfamiliar thematic territory. He similarly depicts issues surrounding oppressed groups in his play *Oleanna* which deals specifically with gender rather than race. According to Rush, "The characters may be moved around by the author from one scene to another, showing different sides of a mood, an issue, an idea, or an attitude" (*A Student Guide to Play Analysis* 270).

In *Oleanna* we can see the reversal of gender role as Carol backfires on John. "I do not think that people are basically good at heart", David Mamet proclaimed in a 2008 article in the *Village Voice* (quoted in Falls). Indeed, that view of human nature has both prompted and informed my writing for the last forty years. I think that people, in circumstances of stress, can behave like swine, and that this, indeed, is not only a fit subject, but the only subject, of drama".

Mamet cleverly creates Carol to fool not only John but also whoever of the readers and spectators chooses not to follow the play attentively. She becomes a great dramatic tool to bring together the play and the audiences into a serious involvement of thinking about the problems discussed and to, then, decide about them. To achieve

this purpose, Mamet leaves most of the action to what is literally unsaid in the play.

Discussing the change in Carol, Jonathan Culpeper explains :

“In *Oleanna*, we witness a schema change in Carol, but it is a negative one, towards greater stereo typicality and depersonalization: she moves from an early view of John as an empowering tutor to a later view of him as oppressor, male predator and obstacle to her empowerment who has to be ruthlessly removed” (116).

The cunning and aggressive Carol strikes most as the more despicable character because she is the one who more explicitly “exploits whatever momentary advantage she possesses.” But Mamet makes sure that he condemns both parties: teachers and students; the university. Contextualizing *Oleanna*, Mamet widely broadens the scope to include every school and university worldwide. Culpeper adds :

“Mamet is deliberately and carefully vague about the setting. It takes place in university, but we don’t know which one; the location is not specified; the course Carol is studying is not mentioned; no indication of their ages is given. Only one of the characters even uses a name; the other is identified- for the purposes of the spirit only- simply John. As far as possible, it seems the characters could be any of us and the setting could be anywhere” (216).

This proves that Mamet is not addressing the problem of just one university of America but he is making the readers aware of such problem which can arise in all the universities. He does not take the side of any of his characters and wants the readers to make their own decision putting themselves in the subject position. As Tyson says:

“ Rather, the inevitability of personal bias makes it imperative that new historicists be as aware of and as forthright as possible about their own

psychological and ideological positions relative to the material they analyze so that their readers can have some idea of the human “lens” through which they are viewing the historical issues at hand. This practice is called “self-positioning” (289).

So depending upon the subject position, different readers will view the play from different perspectives. Some may see the play as the play of sexual harassment while some may see the play as the play of the misuse of feminist power. Accordingly some may see Carol as the victim while some may see John as the victim. In writing *Oleanna*, Mamet never totally favors either character- while it’s obvious that John did not literally attempt to rape Carol, it’s less clear whether he takes advantage of the power he wields as a professor and as a male. Carol, by virtue of her status as a student and a woman, finds herself in the more vulnerable position, by traditional standards- yet it’s uncertain whether such standards apply. As Carol and John discharge their verbal ammunition, each makes a few valid points, leaving the audience to figure out whose side they are on.

## Chapter Three:

### Misuses of Power Led 1960s ,70s American Society to

#### Failure

David Mamet's play *Oleanna* fictionalizes the historical discourse of the 1960s and 1970s American society and revisits it. It represents the self-centeredness of people and failure of American pedagogy which lead to extreme feminism. Mamet portrays Carol as the self-centered and capitalist American who is interested only in her grades and is willing to fulfill all her desires at the expense of her professor's downfall. In the contemporary time capitalist system was based on competitive individualism, where one could only succeed at the cost of the failure of another. In *Oleanna*, Carol's opportunist bid for self-advancement is structured on the same model.

Mamet brings his female character, Carol, as an extreme feminist who not only challenges the male authority, John, but also is able to bring her professor down showing her immorality towards her professor in order to fulfill her selfish desires. Carol and the so called her "group" leave John no space to escape. With the help of her group, Carol acquires a new position of power and accuses John of sexual harassment. Her immorality increases as she accuses John of rape attempt because of which John has to lose his job.

Mamet's aim to depict pedagogy of America is to bring forth the reality of the failure of American education system. The rise of capitalism, individualism which led to feminism affected the educational system. Universities were taken as a battlefield where power was exercised. Students came to study with the desire of economic benefit while the professors showed their true colors regarding the educational

system. Carol took knowledge as a means to upgrade her status while for John American education was just like “garbage” which was absolutely meaningless.

Mamet’s writing of *Oleanna* about the 1960s and 1970s gives light to the bitter reality of America after the New Right was proclaimed. Through this, he explores the change that occurred in the American society which made them selfish on one hand and on the other hand made them immoral. The meaning of being an individual was changed during this period which Mamet depicts in his play.

Finally, this research finds out that Mamet’s revisiting of the history of 1960s and 1970s American society points out the bitter reality of American people which has been under shadow till today. By this, he proves that it is the culture and system that creates an individual accordingly. He discloses the fact that Americans had become individualistic and capitalistic in nature, which led to feminism. People were ready to show their selfishness and were ready to see other’s downfall to have their own economic benefit. Along with that, feminist power also was practiced because of which more immoral activities were taking place. The misuse of feminist power was seen in the academic field as well in the failure of American education. The two characters, John and Carol have been the victim of the new ethos that arises in the contemporary American society where John had to face his downfall while Carol had transformed herself into an immoral being.

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