Power, Conflict and the Academia: David Mamet's *Oleanna*

Prince Dawar & Preeti Bhatt

Abstract

The play Oleanna (1992) by the American playwright David Mamet revolves around the conflict between a professor named John, and a college student Carol. Carol visits the professor in his office to discuss her academic problems. When John realizes that Carol is disheartened, he agrees to help her and puts his arm around her to pacify her. However, Carol charges him with sexual harassment through the tenure committee and accuses him of being opportunistic and exploitative. It is to be noted that Carol takes education as the key through which she may escape her lower-class origins and her mediocre socio-economic status. She desires for the power that John wields as a white, male, university professor who is financially, professionally and socially on a high standing. Like many other Mamet plays, Oleanna is also about power and its relationship to gender and highlights the effect of the American Dream even in the field of academia. The between John and Carol will be analyzed in the context of the American Dream and through Pierre Bourdieu's key theoretical concepts – primarily, his theory of the forms of capital.

Keywords: Academia; Capital; Political correctness; Power conflict; The american dream.

David Mamet (born in 1947) is an American playwright, director and screenwriter, dramatist, and a filmmaker. His writing covers many of the subjects ranging from intimate family relationships to his penchant for collecting knives, hunting, comic books, etc. He has written full length-plays and screenplays, and plays like *The Duck Variations* (1972), *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), and *American Buffalo* (1975)have brought him fame and success as a playwright. His awards include the Joseph Jefferson Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Society of West End Theatre Award, the Pulitzer Prize, the American Academy Award, and the Tony Award. Mamet has both written and directed films and many of his plays have been adapted into films.

The play *Oleanna*, a three-act play published in 1992, is a two-character play written by Mamet. It revolves around two characters, John, a university professor, and Carol, a student, who visits John to discuss her academic problems. The conflict between both of them begins when John asks her to meet him personally after class hours regularly so that he may help her in academics. As Carol is emotionally disturbed due to her inability to understand the lectures in class, John tries to calm her down and puts his arm around her. Carol charges him with sexual harassment through the tenure committee and accuses him of being uncooperative and exploitative. The play focuses on power conflict due to social inequality, miscommunication and its serious consequences in the academic world.

In the first act of the play, Carol is waiting for John in his office to talk about her academic problems. As Carol shares with John the difficulties she is experiencing during John's lectures, their conversation is constantly interrupted by the ringing of the phone, as John, presumably is finalizing a house deal for himself. Concerned by Carol's sense of disquiet, John assures Carol that he will give her an 'A' grade if she agrees to meet him personally to discuss the content of the course. During the conversation, he shares his thoughts about education while demeaning it. As Carol expresses her fears about achieving a good grade in the exam, he puts his arm around her to pacify her. Soon John leaves as he has to attend a surprise party. In the second act of the play, John is seen to be expressing regret that he may lose his tenure and promotion due to the accusations of sexual harassment charged on him by Carol. She now represents an unidentified "group" that has instigated Carol to make the allegations. After their discussion and arguments, she prepares to leave and as he grabs her hand to prevent her, Carol starts screaming for help. The third act reveals that this gesture has been interpreted as attempted rape and battery, and Carol has come to meet John at his office against the advice of the court officer. John expresses his fears to Carol that he may lose all that what he wants for his career and family if the charges are proved against him. As suggested by her group, Carol asks him to ban a list of books including his own from the reading list if he wants the charges to be dismissed. On hearing this, John loses his temper and starts screaming, abusing and hitting Carol, at which the play ends.

The play reminds the reader of the famous Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas debate which occurred during the early '90s in the United States of America. The controversy occurred in 1991 when Justice Thurgood Marshall, American lawyer and Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, decided to retire. It was an opportunity for President George H.W. Bush to appoint a conservative judge to the Supreme Court of the

United States. Clarence Thomas who was an American judge, lawyer, and government official seemed to be the right candidate for the same. President Bush's nomination of Clarence Thomas was instantly controversial as his nomination was opposed by many African-American and Civil Rights organizations, especially over the issue of abortion and his conservative political views. Moreover, the experience of Clarence Thomas was quite less as compared to Justice Marshall as Thomas had served for only two years as a federal judge.

Despite these oppositions, the nomination of Thomas was retained in Senate Judiciary Committee's confirmation hearings. Amidst these controversies, Anita Hill, an African-American law professor at the University of Oklahoma, placed allegations of sexual harassment against Clarence Thomas. She had worked under Thomas at the United States Department of Education and then at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 1981 to 1983. In 1991, Anita Hill revealed that Thomas had harassed her by discussing sexual acts and pornographic films when she refused his invitation to date him while she was working with him. However, the Senate confirmed Clarence Thomas as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court despite Hill's allegations. This case aroused national awareness in the United States about gender inequality even at the highest offices, sexual harassment at the workplace and women's unequal representation in the political sphere. Hill's allegiance to feminist groups has also been noted by critics. While discussing Mamet's Oleanna, Christine MacLeod states, "An interesting parallel may be drawn with the kind of narrative that was constructed around Anita Hill during the Senate hearings on the nomination of Judge Thomas to the Supreme Court. Hill, too, was frequently alleged to be the puppet of feminist pressure groups..." (207). Elaine Showalter observes in this context, "What the hearings displayed were the massive inequalities of race and gender within the American democracy, not the communication problems of two conservative upwardly-mobile African American lawyers. And, of course, Thomas was confirmed and took his set, for life, on the Supreme Court" (703).

The play *Oleanna*'s setting is an American university, and in one sense the play is about the failed ideal of academia, the dream of an intellectual community in which a teacher shares his/her teaching with students in a selfless manner. Like many other Mamet plays, *Oleanna* is also about power and its relationship to gender and highlights the effect of the American Dream. Lawrence R.Samuel comments: "Even the counterculture and feminist and civil rights movements were much about the American Dream, one could reasonably argue, its grounding in the ideal of equal opportunity essentially guaranteeing it will play an important

role in any major economic, political, or social conversation" (2-3).

The American Dream is considered as the dominant theme in the civil religion of America. Jennifer L. Hochschild observes that the American Dream is "the promise that all Americans have a reasonable chance to achieve success as they define it — material or otherwise — through their own efforts, and to attain virtue and fulfilment through success" (225). It is a belief which promises that tomorrow would be better than today and that anything is possible with hope and change. The American Dream stresses the idea of upward mobility through which people may climb the ladder of success. It made the Americans believe in such a system which has limitless possibilities, a better future, and a home of their own with equal opportunities of business.

The American Dream was linked to a better job, better education, a nice house and higher social position in the 1950s.In this context, David Savran quotes Mamet in the book *In their own words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. Mamet demystifies the concept of the American Dream and states that it 'was basically about raping and pillage.' Mamet feels that 'this capitalist dream of wealth' has led to a dead-end: 'We are finally reaching a point where there is nothing left to exploit....The dream has nowhere to go so it has to start turning in on itself'" (qtd. in Savran133). The American Dream was further considered as an opportunity to acquire higher education, the only means to make the young generation achieve their potential.

The characters of Mamet speak the language of self-hood under the influence of the American Dream. Both Carol and John have their own goals and aspirations which drive them to aim for material success to be able to survive in the competitive world. Carol is tensed as she believes that she has joined college and invested money to acquire a higher social standard and financial security. Similarly, John also believes that he would be able to buy a house when he acquires tenure. Kevin Alexander Boon and Mamet in the article "Ethics and Capitalism in the Screenplays of David Mamet" assert that most of the characters of Mamet's plays have a capitalist motive behind their actions, whether it is John and Carol in Oleanna or Ross and Chauffeur in the play *Homicide*. The identity of each is linked to their profession. Boon and Mamet draw attention to economic disparity being the pivotal cause of the crisis in the play. They aver: "Central to the gendered conflict in *Oleanna* is economic power. It is, after all, John's position as a professor — John's job — that places him in an authoritative role over Carol. Although John is an academic, he is no less concerned with acquisition than many of Mamet's other characters" (183).

The play *Oleanna* generated a lot of debate as it depicted the academic scenario with its shortcomings. The reaction of the audience and the readers was aggressive and violent as reported after its performance at various theaters and cinemas during the 1990s. David K. Sauer quotes Mamet in his article "David Mamet's *Oleanna*": "It first frightened me because I'd never imagined that kind of reaction to this play. People used to get into literally fistfights with each other in, in the lobby, and screaming matches and going home . . ." (3). When the play was being performed at California University in the late 1990s, one of the female professors asked the actress playing Carol not to do the play as people got engrossed in it to such an extent that they forgot that it was just a play.

John and Carol belong to different strata of society. Carol comes from an average socioeconomic background and has invested money to come to college. She believes that education is the means to make her life better by making her socially and economically strong. She asserts, "You have no idea what it cost me to come to this school" (*Oleanna*52). She has enrolled in college as higher education may ensure wage-earning. But she is afraid that if she does not have a good grade, she may not get a degree. She thus desires for power and gets into conflict with John.

Power has both negative and positive aspects. Power is considered positive if it is given to marginalized groups to empower them. But it serves a negative purpose when it oppresses and disempowers those who are already marginalized or weak. This relates to various capitals which may be considered as the root cause of hostility between people. Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) a French sociologist, anthropologist, philosopher and public intellectual has introduced four types of capital:

- Economic capital (money and property)
- Cultural capital (cultural goods and services including educational credentials)
- Social capital (acquaintances and networks)
- Symbolic capital (legitimation, prestige, status and authority)

According to Bourdieu, the struggle to achieve various capitals leads to power conflict between individuals. The concepts of habitus, bodily hexis, field and capital, which Bourdieu has proposed, reveal the relationships that exist in different social structures like institutions and ideologies. Habitus describes the social property of individuals which exists in human behaviour and includes their ordered dispositions as they behave in a particular manner. According to Webb et al., "Habitus can be understood as, on the one hand, the historical and cultural production of individual

practices—since contexts, laws, rules and ideologies all speak through individuals, who are never entirely aware that this is happening—and, on the other hand, the individual production of practices—since the individual always acts from self-interest" (15). Habitus includes people's thoughts and their language. It works at the level of the body and its responses. It is both conscious and unconscious. The manners, values and assets that individuals acquire from habitus shape their image in society.

In his book, *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu defines bodily hexis as political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking (69-70). It conveys the idea of being controlled by the outside world and behaving in a particular way due to the expectations of society. Bourdieu's concept of field is related to a particular social space where people struggle for their desired positions. The fields like academia, cultural, intellectual, sports, and politics are related to power wherein the struggle for capital takes place. In the words of Webb et al., "A cultural field can be defined as a series of institutions, rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities" (21-22).

The field of power refers to the space where agents and institutions possess the capital which empowers them. These fields are the sites of struggle between power holders. One observes that in society, fields like academia, sports and politics are the centres of power. David Swartz states, "Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital covers a wide variety of resources, such as verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, scientific knowledge, and educational credentials. His point is to suggest that culture (in the broadest sense of the term) can become a power resource" (43).

Symbolic capital, according to Bourdieu, relates to the reputation and status that a person enjoys in society. He states, "Symbolic capital is the product of a struggle in which each agent is both a ruthless competitor and supreme judge" (*The Logic of Practice* 136). Symbolic capital like prestige, status, fame and authority are considered meaningless if not legitimized by the public opinion as a source of power. Many individuals manipulate the rules of society with the help of public opinion and social prestige bestowed on them by their professions.

In the play *Oleanna*, it is the academic field which provides John with both cultural and social capital, and being a professor, he has an idiosyncratic outlook towards education and society. The level of cultural capital in

Carol is lower than John that is why the latter is more powerful and superior than her. He is a white male, older, of a high social class and a professor who wields power due to his social and institutional identity. Before her acquaintance with the group, Carol has no idea that she is being dominated by John. When Carol gets in contact with the group, who forms her social capital, she goes on to place charges of sexual harassment against John. This is linked to the symbolic capital which Carol strives for. It refers to the prestige, status and authority connected to academic positions which make John's position stable as a professional and an academician and which Carol aspires for.

According to Bourdieu, the position of a person depends on the amount of power which he holds within a field. Due to the turn in the situation, John is compelled to fight for his social and financial security which depends on his professional career. Similarly, Carol, who has a middle-class background and has invested money to attend college, also wants to achieve the same social and financial security. She is keen to get the degree and does not realize that it is knowledge that she should aspire for as a student and not the academic position.

John regards education as hazing and he states, "I said 'hazing.' It means ritualized annoyance." To Carol's surprise, John defines education as "something-other-than-useful" (Oleanna28). Carol is taken aback by John's views regarding education. She states "How can you say in a class. Say in a college class, that college education is prejudice?"(31). John also expresses contempt for the flaws in the education system. He shares with Carol that he has to go through a test before the committee to get tenure. He states "they had people voting on me I wouldn't employ to wax my car" (23). He displays confidence and a sense of authority during his interaction with Carol. This is directly related to the social and cultural capital that Bourdieu mentions. John's economic capital is an outcome of his social and cultural capital. He attempts to resolve his conflict with Carol but loses this opportunity by his own mistakes. Later, he is afraid that he may be expelled from college and will lose both, his status in society and his job at the university. Both John and Carol have their aims in view and therefore, they focus only on their gains without paying heed to the other person's welfare or needs.

Power conflict arises between John and Carol due to the instrumentalization of education. Education for them becomes an instrument to climb the ladder of social success. Here education loses its basic purpose – to support the social, academic, cultural and intellectual development of students so that they can grow that they can grow up as responsible citi-

zens highlights the degeneration of American culture which Mamet has stressed in most of his plays. Marc Silverstein states: "Such an instrumentalized approach to education becomes symptomatic of the larger crisis of American culture Mamet explores, a crisis in which, as Lyotard observes apropos of capitalist legitimation crisis, 'Success is the only criterion of judgment [our culture] will accept'" (115). Carol sees education as an end and not something that gives pleasure as it enlightens. She conceptualizes education as per her own materialistic needs. She believes that a good academic grade will ensure success in her future career and is thus keen to get a higher grade. Similarly, John demeans the very institution of higher education that provides him with the perks to enjoy a luxurious and comfortable life.

The play *Oleanna* depicts the conflict that individuals experience when they do not follow the normal parameters and protocols of the institution. Both Carol and John interact beyond the boundaries of academic and personal space. The tension between them escalates when they cross the borders called divisible limits by Derrida, the French philosopher. He states, "It is at this always divisible limit that what arrives [;] . . . this is the place where the divided university is exposed to reality, to the forces from without (be they cultural, ideological, political, economic, or other)" (236). They are unable to keep political and academic spheres separate from each other and get into trouble. Their relationship requires transparent communication as both the teacher and the student are associated with each other for no other purpose but to share knowledge. According to the American literary theorist, Stanley Fish, transparent communication takes place when the door of the classroom is locked and the real-world problems do not distract the teacher and the student. The locked door secures a space that is not affected by the pressures of the outside world. Fish has referred to this as academicizing. He explains: "To academicize a topic is to detach it from the context of its real-world urgency, where there is a vote to be taken or an agenda to be embraced, and insert it into a context of academic urgency, where there is an account to be offered or an analysis to be performed" (27). But both the teacher and the student fail to do so, and the urgencies of the world outside the classroom - for John, his tenure and the house that he wants to buy, and for Carol, the instigations of the group that pushes her to file a complaint against the professor, impinge on the sanctity of the classroom.

There are chances that students may behave in a particular way under the influence of a socio-political group which may shape their opinions about crucial issues. Fish states "You have little chance (and that entirely a matter of serendipity), however, of determining what they will make of what

you have offered them once the room is unlocked for the last time and they escape first into the space of someone else's obsession and then into the space of the wide, wide world" (58). It is necessary to maintain a gap between the academic urgency and real-world agency so that, the inviolability of the teacher-student relationship is ensured. The incidents in the play indicate that power conflict between them occurs due to the clash between the real world and academic urgency. John tells Carol, "There is no one here but you and me" (27) and later, he puts his hand on her shoulder and says, "I have no desire to *hold* you," "I just want to *talk* to you" (57).

It seems that the accusation of rape over John does not cause the violence, but occurs when Carol instigates John on matters of political correctness. John reassures his wife on the phone and says, "No, no, it's going to be all right. I. I can't talk now, Baby . . ." (79). When John asks Carol to leave the room, she tells him, ". . . and don't call your wife 'baby'" (79). This remark provokes John further and he hits Carol and threatens her with further violence. He tells her, "You vicious little bitch. You think you can come in here with your political correctness and destroy my life?" (79). Cynthia Roper defines political correctness as a "term used to refer to language that seems intended to give the least amount of offense, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*). Carol uses political correctness as a crucial instrument to defend her rights as a woman as also to subvert John's power.

Political correctness had been a much-debated issue in the late 1980s and to the early 1990s in the American education system. The reference to the term 'politically correct' appears in the book titled *Little Red Book* (1964) by Mao Zedong, a Chinese revolutionary leader. It includes the avoiding of such language and behaviour which may insult or discriminate against the marginalized groups in a pejorative way based on sex, race, gender or sexual orientation. The concept of political correctness had been a topic of argument between the conservatives and the liberals who wanted to acquire cultural hegemony over each other. The left-wing liberals in the U.S.A. argued that the conservatives were using the term to divert attention from the discrimination being practised against the disadvantaged groups of society. They alleged that the conservatives were forcing the idea of political correctness which gradually became the cause of a cultural war between both the groups. Political correctness is generally used as a derogatory term suggestive of the fact that these policies are excessive or unwarranted.

David Mamet introduces the term political correctness in the play to sat-

irize those who are too rigid in their observance of political orthodoxy. In the play, John blames Carol for using political correctness against him and mocks her for enforcing it on him. John belongs to the white male elitist class who does not want to change. He affirms, "I find that I am sexist. I am *elitist*" (47). Both John and Carol manifest the idea of political correctness as John being politically incorrect understands the attempts of Carol to make him politically correct. Martin E. Spencer states in the article "Multiculturalism, 'Political Correctness,' and the Politics of Identity": "Political correctness then produces a politics of moral drama, involving the oppressed and the oppressor, in which the oppressed demand recognition of their suffering" (559). Carol's meetings with John in the second and the third act of the play reflect this idea. She comes to him not to sort out the matter but to make John realize his misdemeanour under the influence of the power granted to him by his academic career.

It happens many a time that John ignores what Carol says. John states "Look. It's just a *course*, it's just a book, it's just a..." (12). He believes in a teacher-centred class rather than a student-centred one as he says "It's my *name* on the door, and *I* teach the class" (76). He enjoys his power and has control over the discussion with Carol in the first and second act of the play. He is successful in awakening the interest of Carol but provoking her further proves to be risky for him as she places charges of sexual harassment against him. This is a clear sign of his inability to teach her properly as an academician. She listens to him and takes notes under the pressure of failure caused by the grade given to her by the professor. John fails as a teacher which ultimately brings her in contact with the group that provokes Carol to file a complaint against John leading to his personal and professional downfall.

The characters of both John and Carol exemplify the state of a student and a teacher who expect a lot from each other. At the end of the play, John is forced to behave in the same way that Carol has accused him of and he shouts in a fit of rage "Rape you ...? Are you kidding me...? I wouldn't touch you with a ten-foot pole. You little *cunt* ..." (79). The mounting tension in the play results in John losing his mental equilibrium at the end and acting in a way, he would not have normally done. The play in Mamet's words is about "the failed Utopia of Academia" because John, despite his good intentions, messes up everything and reaches a point of no return (qtd. in Badenhausen 15). He fails in the accomplishment of his goals which may bring him to a dystopian state with no job or tenure.

The power conflict between John and Carol reflects that wrong teaching has adverse effects on both the characters. John neglects his duties as an

academician and does not respond to Carol who expects unbiased support from him. For John, the education system deals with fools and relies on examination papers made by fools. Although he is a part of the education system, he criticizes the same system before Carol. The play highlights the fact that academicians, being mentors of students, should take their responsibility seriously and should pay heed to the problems experienced by students. This is the cause of the conflict between the two characters in Mamet's play. Elaine Showalter states, "Carol is confused; is worried about passing the class; is putting herself through college; is without any apparent support system — shows how easily academics can misread their students and even cavalierly dismiss their struggles as unimportant, the very mistake made by John" (7). While the play has an inconclusive ending, it is clear that the conflict between the professor and the student cannot be resolved through violence as the final solution of the problem.

David Mamet's play Oleanna highlights the insecurities related to power and the fears within the academic culture through the verbal duel of both the characters. Recalling the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas controversy which occurred during the early '90s when Hill, a lawyer and academic, accused U.S. Supreme Court nominee and her supervisor Thomas of sexual harassment, the play focuses on the fragile relationship that exists between a teacher and a student, and the responsibility each of them needs to assume to nurture that relationship. Mamet seems to indicate that power may blind one to the problems experienced by others and cause one to take incorrect decisions which ultimately devastate life as is with John at the end of the play. Oleanna presents two self-absorbed people who feel fundamentally oppressed by the academic power structure as it inhibits their efforts to thrive in the world outside academia, while at the same time they instrumentalize education to achieve their own ends. Their conflict appears to be a reflection of the influence of the American Dream that promises success and happiness to every American citizen who works hard to earn a living. But the concept of the American Dream also camouflages the competition, the race for success that every American has to enter wherein only one person will win, while the others will fail.

An analysis of the play based on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capitals indicates that John, being a male, white professor, enjoys greater social and cultural capital as compared to Carol who is a female student and has a poor economic background. Carol covets the symbolic capital of power and social prestige that John displays, and under the influence of her group that forms her social capital alleges that John is opportunistic and exploitative. This scuffle for capital, in Bourdieu's terms, becomes a cause of the conflict between John and Carol. The conflict is aggravated by Car-

ol's use of political correctness against John to demand recognition of her suffering. Mamet's play, *Oleanna*, thus comes as a warning to those who are a part of the educational system to take on their responsibilities as a teacher or as a student with utmost care so that the higher aim of imparting knowledge is not lost in the human tussle for power.

Works Cited

Badenhausen, Richard."The Modern Academy Raging in the Dark: Misreading Mamet's Political Incorrectness in 'Oleanna.'" *College Literature* 25.3 (Fall 1998): 1-19.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 1990. Print.

Derrida, Jacques. Without Alibi. Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2002. Print.

Fish, Stanley. Save the World on Your Own Time. USA: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

Hochschild, Jennifer L. Facing up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1996. Print.

MacLeod, Christine. "The Politics of Gender, Language and Hierarchy in Mamet's 'Oleanna." Journal of American Studies 29.2 (1995): 199-213. Print.

Mamet, David. Oleanna. New York: Vintage, 1993. Print.

Roper, Cynthia. "Political Correctness." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 31 Jan. 2020, https://www.britannica.com/top-ic/political-correctness. Accessed 17 Sept. 2020.

Samuel, Lawrence R. *The American Dream: A Cultural History*. New York: Syracuse UP, 2012. Print.

Sauer, David K. David Mamet's Oleanna. London: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print.

Savran, David. *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988. Print.

Showalter, Elaine, "Acts of Violence: David Mamet and the Language of Men," *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 Nov. 1992: 16. Google Scholar.

Silverstein, Marc. "We're Just Human': 'Oleanna' and Cultural Crisis."-South Atlantic Review 60.2 (1995): 103-20. Print.

Spencer, Martin E. "Multiculturalism, 'Political Correctness,' and the Politics of Identity" *Sociological Forum* 9.4 (1994): 547-67. Print.

Swartz, David. Culture and Power. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997. Print.

Webb, Jen, Tony Schirato, and Geoff Danaher. *Understanding Bourdieu*. Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2002. Print.