

The Theme of the American Dream in David Mamet's Play *American Buffalo*: An Analysis

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Abstract:

This research paper is a study of the representation of the American Dream in David Mamet's play *American Buffalo*. In this study an analysis has been made how the playwright exposes the failure of capitalism and the business world to bring American Dream into reality.

Primary as well as secondary sources have been judiciously utilized in writing this paper.

Even though the American Dream is the idea that anyone, regardless of their birthplace or their socio-economic class, can attain his/her own version of success in a society in which upward mobility is possible for everyone, exclusion and dominance are important aspects of the same. Business helps a limited group of people to succeed, but at the same time it destroys the dreams of many. Mamet here provides a critique of the saga of big business for achieving the American Dream. The play is set in an aggressive business world. The playwright uses the fitting instrument of the game of poker in the play for exposing different aspects of the American Dream. The title of the play is thoughtfully given and the buffalo head nickel is a symbol of the vague nature of the success dream. Negative personality traits such as personal disintegration, dishonesty and deception are highlighted in the characters of the play who are actually thieves and who claim themselves to be businessmen. Power play is an important aspect in the chase after the American Dream and a constant struggle for power is seen in the play. The characters in the play are underprivileged ones and they want to attain power by becoming rich through business [sic.], but the erroneous and unlawful paths they take for success lead them to frustration.

Key Words: American Dream, capitalism, power

Introduction:

This research paper is an attempt to study the theme of the 'American Dream' in David Mamet's play *American Buffalo*. The author here exposes the failure of big business as a means to achieve success for all. American Dream is a major theme in Mamet's plays and this play represents the relation between the success dream and the business world and its eventual failure to fulfill the dreams of the characters.

Objectives:

The objectives of this study are:

- To study the representation of the American Dream in *American Buffalo*.
- To analyze how the playwright exposes the failure of capitalism and the business world to fulfil the success dreams of all.

Methodology:

This is an analytical study of the text with the help of resources accessed, such as books, journals, encyclopaedias etc. Primary as well as secondary sources have been judiciously utilized in writing this paper.

Discussion:

In the words of James Truslow Adams, a historian who popularised the term “American Dream,” it is the “... dream of a land in which life should be better and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement” (27). The concept of ‘American Dream’ identified with the United States contains an assurance of development and success. The dream has other aspects apart from material success. It includes attainment of the highest development as individuals and recognition from others without being discriminated on any ground. It has tempted people from all nations to migrate to the country.

The history of the dream of success in America may be traced back to the time when people began to go to this new and largely unexplored country with hopes and aspirations of success of all types. The meaning of the ‘American Dream’ has changed with the change of time. The American Dream and capitalism are interrelated. One of the earliest events in American history that revealed the vulnerability of capitalism and the dream of success in America was the Great Depression of 1929. It was felt that capitalism was not the sole way to success. But, the success dream in America did not completely lose its relevance even after the Great Depression. Although the dream has variations and it has changed over the centuries, quest for wealth has remained a constant component.

The theme of the American Dream has found a space in American literature. American drama is no exception in this regard. Several American dramatists have dealt with the theme of the American Dream. Edward Albee, Arthur Miller and David Mamet are the

most prominent among them. Albee's *American Dream* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are often mentioned in this regard. *American Buffalo* is a 1975 play by David Mamet. The characters of the play are a group of men, viz., Don Dubrow, a man in his late forties and the owner of Don's Resale Shop; Walter Cole, nicknamed Teach is a friend and associate of Don; and Bob, Don's gopher. There is another character named Fletcher and two women characters named Ruthie and Grace who never appears in the play. They are only mentioned by other characters along with another name, Earl, a card player. Even the collector of coins never appears on stage. The scene of the play is set in the junkshop owned by Don. Act I of the play takes place in the morning of a certain Friday and Act II starts at around 11.00 that night. The men conspire to steal a coin collection from a well off person, who bought a buffalo head nickel from Don for much less than what it was worth. Don and Bob plan to steal the collection after suspecting that he went away for the weekend. Teach later on persuades Don to leave Bob out of the plot, because he believes that Bob is inexperienced and might prove himself disloyal to Don. Bob, towards the end of the play, wants to sell a buffalo head nickel to Don, similar to the one he sold to the collector. Teach is angered at this, because he thinks it to be the same nickel and hits Bob at the head. It is revealed in the dialogue that Fletcher is also beaten up by thugs at the end.

There is an extract from Folk Tune at the beginning of the play:

“Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

He is peeling down the alley in a black and yellow Ford.”

This sets the tune of the play. The Ford, which was said to be the people's car of the early part of the twentieth century because it was the first one to be produced at a large scale in a highly sophisticated factory and which made it possible for every American to dream of buying a car, becomes a symbol. It may be mentioned here that the dream of owning a personal car was only next to the dream of house ownership in America.

At the beginning of the play we find Don and Bob sitting in the junk shop. There is a poker table inside the shop and it is clear from their conversation that they played poker last night and they lost the game. Poker is an apt instrument in the play *American Buffalo*. It is a card game involving betting and individualistic play where the player, who has the highest rank and combination of cards, wins. Some of these cards remain hidden till the end of the game just like the forces of society that work in the upward or downward movement of an

individual. There is a hierarchy of the cards; the winner and loser is determined by these. Similarly, there is a hierarchy in the society and in the capitalist business world. In poker each player has an equal chance to get 'good' cards with high values. Cards are shuffled in order to ensure it. So, every player has an equal chance of being a winner. But, the irony is that only one player can get the best hand (set of cards). Similar is the case with the achievement of the American Dream.

Cheating in the poker table is an issue often referred by Don and Teach. Cheating, as depicted in the play, *American Buffalo*, is common in the business world.. Businessmen often deviate from business ethics in order to succeed. This happens due to the intoxicating drive to achieve the Success Dream. They do not feel guilty. Bluffing is a primary feature of poker. This quality makes it different from the other card games. In *American Buffalo* bluffing exceeds the periphery of poker playing. It has become a part of business strategies adopted by the characters. The question of business ethics is of no importance to them. Bob, the gopher bluffs to his master about his watch on the coin collector and thus risks his life.

The buffalo head nickel itself is a symbol. It is believed by Don and his compeers that the coin will bring them a lot of money and thus make them rich. They, in fact, believe that it will fulfil their version of the American Dream. The coin becomes a symbol of success for them. In Act II of the play they fail to execute their plan to get the coin back. So, they fail to achieve success in their business and in life. Stealing back a coin and reselling it to the legal owner is also business for them. Earning money is their sole concern. Everything else is unimportant. But, Mamet is not only critical about the characters in the play. His criticism extends to the concept of business for success as a whole. We, in our drive for success, always forget to think about others. In this sense Mamet's criticism is directed more to the society than to the characters. In fact, he offers a critique of modern society in the play and busts the myth of big business as a means of success.

Mamet's characters of businessmen best represent the failure to establish any relationship with other people in social fields and the sense of emptiness in their souls. They wish for a male bond. Women characters are absent in the business circle. Even if they are mentioned, seemingly they are given no importance by the male characters. The following dialogue between Teach and Don in terms of poker playing makes it clear:

DON The only one won any money, Fletch and Ruthie.

TEACH (*pause*) Cunt had to win two hundred dollars.

DON She's a good card player.

TEACH She is *not* a good card player, Don. She is a mooch and she is a locksmith and she plays like a woman.

Pause.

Fletcher's a card player, I'll give him that. But Ruthie ... I mean, you see how she fucking plays ... (Mamet 161)

It is inevitable that the men in business characterised in the play will frustrate – not because they cannot find a friend or compeer – but because they cannot befriend any. They have a trap underneath their desire for friendship. In case of *American Buffalo* the businessmen try to survive in the competitive business world by hook or by crook. They adopt unfair means for doing so and even plan a burglary. But this plan does not work due to the lack of faith and honesty among them. Teach is dishonest in convincing Don to abandon Bob from the execution of the plan to rob the coin collector:

TEACH Far from it. All I'm saying the job is beyond him. Where's the shame in this? ... Don? Where is the shame in this? You take care of him, *fine*. (Now this is loyalty.) But Bobby's got his own interests, too. And you cannot afford (and simply as a *business* proposition) you cannot afford to take the chance. (Mamet 183-184)

Don, who lacks faith in his gopher, deserts him without much moral scruple:

BOB And what about the thing?

DON Forget about it. (Mamet 191)

Bob is also undutiful and bluffs to Don. It is natural that such a group of men cannot stay in a close and stable bond. Their plan is thus bound to be a failure.

Personal disintegration of the men in business in *American Buffalo* is noticeable. Business culture as a whole has become corrupted. With the chase after immediate and easy ways to achieve success, corruption and dominance have become a part of the American Dream. The characters in the play knowingly involve in immoral ways and they are not

concerned with morality at all; they are unscrupulous. Thieves are shown as businessmen in it. They are people who are not sincere even in theft. By representing the characters as such Mamet exposes the business world, which lacks business ethics. Everyone in this world wants power. He has shown poker players, who do not have the spirit of players. They are rather gamblers. They want power and they want to win. The power greedy characters actually represent everyone chasing the American Dream.

A teacher-student framework is prepared to express power struggle in Mamet's *American Buffalo*. The character Walter Cole is nicknamed Teacher (Teach) in the play. Dominance of the more powerful question raiser is observed:

DON You couldn't say a word?

TEACH I tell you now.

DON He was cheating, you couldn't say anything?

TEACH Don. Don, I see you're put out, you find out this guy is a cheat ...

DON According to you.

TEACH According to me, yes I am the person it's usually according to when I'm talking. Have you noticed this? And I'm not crazed about it you're coming out I would lie to you on this. Fuck this. On anything. Wake up, Jim. I'm not the cheat. I know you're not mad at me, who are you mad at? Who fucked you up here, Don? Who's not here? Who?

...

DON Don't fuck with me here, Teach.

TEACH I don't fuck with my friends, Don. I don't fuck with my business associates. I am a businessman, I am here to do business, I am here to face facts. ... (Mamet 231-232)

In the above passage, Don wants Teach to correct him when he is wrong. Just like a student, he wants to be reminded of the faults by the teacher. Teach also assumes the attitude of a responsible teacher, only lacking in the true spirit, with his self-interest always poking in.

Hierarchical relationships are thus established among the characters. This hierarchy cannot be reversed:

DON Go and get your car.

TEACH I am not your nigger. I am not your wife. (Mamet 250)

Here, Teach is angry because he cannot bear to be directed by Don over whom he has proved his superiority in the earlier part of the play. In this play each character tries to influence the others in different ways; but they hardly do anything. Their action is mostly limited to powerful talks – to be more precise – powerful questions.

Search for power is an aspect of the American Dream itself. In the neck break competition for success people believe in the Darwinian Theory of “survival of the fittest.” According to Max Weber, power is the chance of a man, or a number of men “to realize their own will in communal action, even against the resistance of others” (Weber qtd. in Coser 230). Power is neither force nor authority; but it is related to both. The traditional idea of power considers it as something to be possessed. But, Michel Foucault, the twentieth century French philosopher, social theorist, historian of ideas and literary critic, discards this traditional idea. According to him, power is exercised rather than possessed. Power is often described as the ability to influence the behaviour of people with or without resistance. It does not always involve coercion. Power is not repressive; it is productive for Foucault, since it comes from the lower status. It is a complex strategic situation in a given society. It is analysed as coming from the bottom up. Jana Sawicki says, “Foucault’s ‘bottom-up’ analysis of power is an attempt to show how power relations at the micro-level of society make possible certain global effects of domination, such as power class and patriarchy” (21).

Mamet chooses marginal characters in *American Buffalo*. They are positioned at the perimeter of the circle of society. They strive to come to the centre, achieve more power and succeed. In *American Buffalo* the plotted break-in never takes place due to resistance from some force, viz., the interference of Teach and subsequent perplexity of Don. Resistance is betrayal here. In the name of resistance conspiracies take place in the play.

The problem of forming a self-identity is important to succeed in business. This, in turn, has a connection with the power play in competitive business world. In *American Buffalo*, nearly all characters venture to subdue others, because they think it as their only way to self-assertion. But their notion is proved wrong because every one of them fails to

accomplish their goal – the American Dream. Instead, the wrong and illegal ways they adopt for accomplishment lead them to danger. Teach hits Bob and is in trouble; Fletcher also ends up being beaten.

American Dream has remained a powerful factor still influencing the life of many. Mamet points out the danger of this in his play *American Buffalo*. The past is not important for the present or future evaluation of businessmen in both Miller and Mamet's plays. In Miller's *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman is thrown away in spite of his faithful service to his company in the past. Similarly, in *American Buffalo* Teach says, "The Past is Past, and this is Now, and so Fuck you" (p. 163). This aspect of the modern life in a capitalistic world is expressed in Teach's frustrated remark, "We all live like the cavemen" (254). The characters in Mamet's play feel it necessary to be unethical and unscrupulous in their dealings in the competitive business world.

Mamet's male characters form a homo-social world. A feeling of male bonding helps them to stay together. They do not like women characters and express their dislike inconsiderately. They criticise these absent characters using abusive language. But they cannot be branded as misogynist or homophobic. Simply depicting men in his plays does not mean that he is giving more importance to male characters. Male characters are shown to indicate or even to personalise some frailties and flaws in men. Similarly, keeping women off stage does not mean that they are neglected. They are minor characters, but not without power. The businessmen in Mamet's plays cover their fear and powerlessness by filthy language. Language is the shield in their struggle.

Conclusion:

In *American Buffalo*, the failure of big business to bring American Dream into reality has been represented. It facilitates a limited group of people. But at the same time it crushes the dreams of many. Exclusion and dominance are essential parts of the American Dream. Mamet here provides a critique of the myth of big business for realisation of the American Dream. The play is set in a competitive business world. Poker is a fitting instrument in the play for expressing different aspects of the American Dream. The buffalo head nickel is itself a strong symbol expressing the elusive nature of the success dream. Personal disintegration, dishonesty and cheating are some of the dominant characteristics of the characters of the play who are actually thieves and who claim themselves to be businessmen. Power play is an

important aspect of the American Dream and the play is full of power relations. A constant struggle for power has been observed in the play. The characters in the play are marginal characters and they want to move to the powerful positions by earning money, but the wrong and illegal ways they adopt for accomplishment lead them to danger.

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