

✿ Exposing Unethical Nature
A Study of David Mamet's *American Buffalo* ✿



فضح الطبيعة الأخرافية: دراسة (أمريكا بافلو) لديفيد ماميت

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Abstract:

This study is one in corpus literature. It highlights unethical nature through David Mamet's *American Buffalo* which exposes unethical practices in American business ethics by studying and analyzing the three different main characters Danny, Bob and Teach. They want to surge ahead to gain monetary gains at any cost. Their egocentric attitude does not allow them to realize that they are following unethical and illegal ways of life in order to ride the wave of success.

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الخلاصة:

الدراسة تقع في حقل الأدب. أنها تسلط الضوء على الطبيعة الاخلاقية من خلال مسرحية ديفيد ماميت (أمريكا بافلو) التي تعرض التصرفات الاخلاقية في التعاملات الأمريكية بدراسة وتحليل الشخصيات الرئيسية الثلاثة في المسرحية وهما داني، بوب و تيج. هم يسعون للحصول على مكاسب مالية بأي شكل من الأشكال، إلا أن أنانيتهم جعلتهم يتبعون الطرق الاخلاقية والغير قانونية في تعاملاتهم لركوب موجة النجاح.

Introduction

David Mamet is well- established! American dramatist and film maker of the late twentieth century and of the contemporary times. He has a very long dramatic and film-making experience. His play *American Buffalo* exposes unethical practices in the American business world. The play is based on the view that there is no difference between lampoon proletariat and stockbrokers or corporate lawyers. Mamet considers all of them as conducting illegal works. He highlights the unhappy atmosphere in the country where people never attempted to differentiate between right and wrong and are ready to surrender friendship for monetary gains. With a very little action in the play, the dramatist exposes psychological tensions among characters through constant use of slang and strong language. It is a story of the three friends Danny, Bob and Teach who wait for the mysterious 'Fletcher' for the burglary." Ultimately they become angry with each other out of frustration and strike and finally drive Bob to the hospital and expose their amoral and unethical behavior."(Gale,67)

David Mamet's dramatic career begins during the Cold War and continues till the present time. During the Cold War, he wrote several famous plays like *Lakeboat* (1970), *The Duck Variations* (1972), *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1974), *American Buffalo* (1975), *Reunion* (1976),



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The Water Engine (1976), *A Life in the Theatre* (1977), *The Woods* (1979), *Edmond* (1982), *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (1984), *The Shawl* (1985), *Bobby Gould in Hell* (1989), *Oleanna* (1992) and others having varied, significant and colorful themes. Most of these plays were well received and had grand success in theatres. Apart from dramas, Mamet has on his credit three children's plays, essay collections and individually published articles. His works have always attracted international scholars for aesthetic, thematic, stylistic, linguistic and discourse study.”(Barbera,34)

David Mamet has been praised and criticized complexity of presentation of themes and for his different linguistic style. According to Steven Gale, (2011) Mamet's plays are primarily about interpersonal relationships which have been projected significantly and symbolically through simple, day to day activities and communications. His plays are based on realistic and symbolic situations in American life and tend to become universal. Characters with accurate, sparse, and brief dialogues make critics compare him to Harold Pinter and Thomas Beckett. His protagonists are caught in the need of interaction which is realistic to the contemporary life in America. Modern and Post-Modern American city lifestyle and principles have led people from all walks of life to fall astray. People have been forced to fall out of ethical and moral principles of life since they follow the much sought after 'American Dream'.

David Mamet finds these life principles suitable to express through dramatic art. Mamet understands the nature of problematic, tense interpersonal relations, motivation for such relations and their impact on communication and attitudes. Most of his characters are involved into unethical ways of life making their relations more troublesome. They lead unethical ways of life instead of being simple, straightforward and



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humble. Mamet's characters represent disgruntled and dissatisfying Americans of the late twentieth century. They are motivated by illegal ways of life which lead them to debilitate in the course of time. Through *American Buffalo*, Mamet exposes the real nature of people involved in business.

American Buffalo (1975) gave popularity to David Mamet as a famous contemporary American dramatist. Mamet earned the Obie Award as the best new dramatist for this play. The play became so popular that different national touring companies and regional theatres of America staged various productions making David Mamet a prominent dramatist.

The setting of the play is a junk shop in which Danny, Bob and Teach, plan to steal a valuable coin. The plot is deceptively simple. As the curtain draws, Danny plans a robbery with Bobby, a former drug addict. They are joined by Walter Cole, called Teach, who expects Dubrow to keep Bobby out of the plan and involve him. Mamet uses dialogue in such a way that it exhibits a lack of communication and understanding and they abandon the burglary. A lot of complications spurt up giving expression to unethical practices in the American business world. The planned burglary never takes place but Danny and Tech brutally attack Bobby towards the end and prepare to take him to the hospital.

Mamet's art of dramatization in *American Buffalo* is powerful and it exposes the lack of ethical and moral behavior in the American business world. The junk shop is suggestive of a variety of business establishments. The dramatist tries to show connection between man's desire to dominate others and his need to possess material wealth. In other words, he tries to signify man's need to 'possess' material world and money irrespective of ethical property. Mamet suggests how the





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corrupt nature of people has a disheartening impact and leads them to do a series of illegal acts. The acts are absurd, ridiculous, irrational and unpleasant. Mamet makes words and actions as powerful to project man as trapped within a world which is on the journey of possession of the other human beings, pride and wealth at the cost of the other's lives and at the cost of immoral gestures. The characters are placed in the world which is similar to that of absurd theatre. Mamet expresses his indebtedness to Harold Pinter to whom he had sent the scripts of his plays. He differs from Pinter in the sense that he implies speech patterns that signify more than actual words that the characters speak. In *American Buffalo*, Bobby is unable to express himself coherently and it reveals his inability to comprehend the others, their intentions, their life forces and the surrounding, the world in which he exists and suffers.

American Buffalo is similar to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The characters in both the plays are desperately waiting for someone or something that never comes or happens. In *Waiting for Godot*, the characters wait for someone who can bring solace to their problems, sufferings and life. In *American Buffalo* they wait for prosperity, the American dream to fulfill, changed ideal in life in America of the post Cold War period. The end of both the plays is identical. They are left unresolved. Without doubt, there are differences and they are more substantial. Don and Teach are waiting for the arrival of their fellow thief who suggests gaining wealth at the cost of other's suffering and the person whom they are waiting is well known whereas, Gogo and Didi are waiting for Godot, an unknown mysterious entity that appears metaphysical. The settings of both the plays are dissimilar. Beckett's play is placed in void whereas Mamet's play has definite locale, an American

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business setting. Mamet's objective is to dismantle the myth of human existence where theological existence is necessary. He tries to project how the young generation is interested in breaking the cultural myths.

Danny Dubrow's resale shop provides a narrow circle of attention from which Mamet expands his story. Metaphorically he depicts the conflict between materialism and spiritualism of American culture. The word 'business' is symbolic of unethical ways irrespective of 'friendship' to gain monetary wealth. The dramatist's emphasis on these concepts is visible in the words that his characters use. Characters repeatedly refer to 'business' which is unreal, unethical rather than the real business of junk shop. Associated words like job, free enterprise, etc. appear recurrently. There are numerous discussions about the interpersonal relationship with focus on friendship. Donny is forced to make a difficult choice between business, and values of business and friend and friendship ties personified in Teach and Bobby. At the beginning of the play, Bobby tells Donny how he failed to perform the task of setting up a robbery that he was asked to carry out by the old man. The shop owner, his friend, Donny becomes mentor and helps him by saying that Bobby should act like a successful man. He says:

You take him and put him down in some strange town with just a nickel in his pocket, and by nightfall he'll have that town by the balls. (*American Buffalo*: 6)

Don boasts:

... everything I or Fletcher knows we picked up on the street. That's all business is... common sense, experience, and talent. (*American Buffalo*, 8)





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Unconsciously Bobby is interested in knowing where the desire of profit making ends and where friendship starts. It is clear that in the run on making money, modern men have forgotten the real friendly ties. Don opens that business is nothing but taking care of the self. He says: "That's what business is People taking care of themselves." (*American Buffalo*, 8)

Dubrow tries to define friendship after defining business. He realizes that when friendship and business come in conflict, friendship does not last, it loses significance. As Teach enters, all of them debate over money and friends. Teach complains about how his friends treated him, still his interest is in becoming number one in the business. Teach argues that business issues are different than the ideas of friendship and loyalty. Bobby is ex drug addict and Teach humiliates him. The junk shop owner takes the tough decision to remove Bobby from partnership. Bobby goes to get some food but Teach stops him and Teach argues that a business is not restricted by the rules of loyalty, friendship and pleasure. The same was felt by Dubrow in relation to Fletcher. Drug addiction has negative impact on interpersonal relation and affects the attitude of others. Though Bobby is ex drug addict it has impact on the relation at the present moment. Teach attacks Bobby, verbally humiliating him for his addiction. He says to Don:

Yes. And I'm sorry, Don. I admire that. All that I'm saying don't confuse business with pleasure. (*American Buffalo*, 29)

Removing a partner from business is a difficult decision for the shop owner. Friendship implies values and belief in values keeps the shop from degenerating. For the sake of profit making he removes the partner, the friend.



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When Don dismisses Bobby from robbery, he violates the code of mutual friendship and loyalty making himself free from restriction of impositions of friendship, honour, loyalty, integrity and respect. Don wishes to cut Fletcher from the deal for his trust and for the reason that Donny's motive is revenge and Teach's intention is robbery. Donny is jealous of Teach since he did not satisfy him for a buffalo nickel. He expected five times larger amount. Teach is a liar but claims that he doesn't deceive his friends in business but his actions do not justify his words. Teach uses bad words for Bobby and his other friends - Ruthie, Grace and Fletcher. He accuses them of cheating at cards. The card players are normally expected to believe each other and not cheat but it does not happen so. Teach is capable of eliminating any rival at any cost and at any instant. At a moment, he tells Donny that he will kill the homeowner whose house he is robbing in order to avoid attack on him. He wants to protect his own interests since he is self-centred. It is observed that business and friendship are incompatible value systems, since business is based on the motive of profit. Friendship is related to morality, human values and spiritual values. Desire for acquisition becomes prominent in American life and culture.

In *American Buffalo*, the two motives, business and friendship, clash resulting in the success of business over friendship. These are the opposing values and Mamet has taken the risk of bringing them together successfully to project the real nature of people. The dramatist propounds the idea that personally or culturally accepted subjective values as primacy of good over evil are emblematic of belief in the superiority of good over bad. Jonathan Culler, a structuralist critic, is of the same view





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when he says that the bad is seen as “complication, a negation, a manifestation or a disruption of the first (good).” (Culler, 93)

Business is superior in *American Buffalo* and friendship is inferior since materialism overpowers humanism. The two are in conflict with each other. Derrida states that the two things cannot co-exist peacefully. One dominates the other. The violence towards the end of the play is expected. Teach loses his balance and attacks Bobby. Donny acknowledges how Teach's tactics are effective. Don falls prey to the spell cast by Teach. He realizes that Teach has been using him and has betrayed him.

Mamet mentions Stanislavskian concept that ‘language defines action; behavior stems from what's said and how it's said’ (Lawson, 41). The kind of language used by characters is suggestive and significant of their nature and behavior. Teach's everyday speech is uncommon and is representation of low level obscene language that is heard on the streets of America. Most of the characters in the play are competent for being degenerative and for using such language. Their speech is full of words like fuck and Bullshit. It is ungrammatical language implying logical irrelevance. Such violent, obscenity of language dehumanizes them and others. It leads to rage and is indicative of emptiness in life. Towards the end of the play, they become physically violent leading to further deterioration of character. Teach's actions are conducive to the American myths of success. He says that the nation is founded on the principle of free enterprise, freedom of the individual castigated within deceptive nature. The following exchange exemplifies this:

Teach: You know what is free enterprise?

Don: No. What?

Teach: The freedom...



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Don: ...yeah?

Teach: Of the Individual...

Don: ...yeah?

Teach: To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.

Don: Uh huh...

Teach: In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit.

(Buffalo 57-8)

Teach's life is based on this principle of 'free enterprise' leading to 'make a profit' and says that if people do not conform to these principles, the society will degenerate and people will become savages in the wilderness. He is interested in removing whatever obstructions in his path at any cost before they become troublesome. Teach is most selfish and aggressive American entrepreneur without any values and manners. He is ready to follow any path for getting successful. "It's kickass or kissass, Don, and I'd be lying if I told you any different." (Buffalo, 59) Teach believes in free enterprise which means he is ready to attack coin collector. He is most selfish and aggressive American entrepreneur, devoid of any values, manners and even devoid of success. As a businessman he uses cleverness to betray his friend and turn one of them against the other. Teach uses cleverness to persuade Don to betray Bobby and turn Don against Fletcher Page, whom the junk store owner had trusted by claiming that Fletcher had cheated Donny at cards the previous night. The result is that Don's belief in the value of friendship decreases. Teach becomes the cause to make others disbelieve in friendship. There are the results of the myth of the American Dream. Mamet (Roudane,74) claimed that national culture of America is founded on the idea of struggle and success. One rises from the masses instead of rising with masses. Self is important in





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the herd than the herd and the society. Extremity becomes opportunity and the myth affects the spirit of the individual. Mamet and several other artists have made the American myth prominent in their artistic works.

In America business and friendship are incompatible value systems because business is based on financial profit and friendship is tied to interpersonal relationship, morality humanism and moral and spiritual values. Modern world is devoid of morality and ethics. Everyone is riding the principle of success in gaining money. Hence desire, greed have become dominant value systems in new American culture. While talking of the nature of the Americans, Mamet once said:

We are spiritually bankrupt – that's what's wrong with this country... We don't regenerate our spirit. These things aren't luxuries, they're necessities for human kind, for modern men and women, just as they were for ancient men and women. The spirit has to be replenished. (De Vries, 22)

Mamet intentionally shows how Business and friendship clash in the *American Buffalo*. Don Dubrow's behaviour sidetracks friendship relations. For him business is superior, friendship is inferior. The superior disrupts, negates manifests the inferior. Reward of materialism is greater than humanistic, spiritual benefits. When the two terms are brought together in conflict, business and friendship, one of them dominates the other. In the present case, since the men are riding the American Dream business dominates friendship. It occupies commanding position and in the end violence erupts as one of the colleagues has been brutally attacked. "Teach grabs a nearby object and hits Bobby viciously on the



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side of his head.” (Buffalo,75) Don acknowledges how effective Teach’s tactics have been as he tells his friend that he was responsible for all.

As Mamet said, the play is based on traditional tragedy. The protagonist undergoes reversal of situation. Don realizes his mistakes and makes amends with his friend. He pulls some money out of his pockets and offers to his friend and tries to show that he can repent. Don flushes in anger and tells Teach to ‘shut up’ and ‘leave the kid.’ Teach senses that he is losing, he justifies his words and actions. Bobby brings the coin of nickel to capture his friend’s favour. The nickel is the central symbol in the play. It symbolizes something valuable that people try continuously to seek for. It is symbol of wealth that the Americans relentlessly try to gain irrespective of morality and ethics. Joseph Olszewski calls it as “the lawless quest for monetary gain; in addition, the pursuit of profit brought the ... American plains to the verge of extinction.” (Olszewski:168) The two sides of the coin are also symbolic. One shows the buffalo and the other shows the Indian. Both of them can be seen as the victims of American dream, the American way of life, capitalism and greed. Steven Lawson calls the title as rich as it ‘encloses several metaphors at once; the great beast reduced to a nickel; the mythical Old West doubling as a junk shop; the guys who suspect they’re being buffaloes by the young punk.’ (Lawson, 43)

There is yet another side to the coin of nickel. The conflict between business and friendship provides the line of action that reveals the authorial intention. Nickel is rare like rarity and value of friendship which is difficult to evaluate as its value cannot be interpreted in financial terms. Throughout the play Don underestimates his relationship with Bobby, but towards the end he is unable to define his love for Bobby. He realizes the





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amount of betrayal of Bobby. Teach is antagonist. His response to Bobby's offer of friendship to Don illustrates his nature and character. Teach is identified with Lincoln penny which is worth only "twenty fuckin' cents" which is less than a cup of coffee costs at a Riverside café. Bobby tries to be friendly to Don. Teach's claim of being useful businessman is worthless. Teach's refusal to learn anything about coin is suggestive. Don offers him coin catalogue so that it would help him during the burglary. It is indicative of Teach's unwillingness to rob someone. Further he is unable to explain how he would carry out burglary. He proves himself to be useless. While playing cards he loses, and is unable to talk about nutrition and makes himself a fool. Teach has nothing to teach anyone. The relationship between Don and Bobby makes him angry because he is left out by them. He feels he is deceived and betrayed. Deception and betrayal are watchwords of business ethics which Teach is unable to understand. Hence it casts a negative, debilitating impact on him. It makes him lash out at the junk store owner with venomous contemptuous words.

Teach: You fake. You fucking fake. You fuck your friends. You have no friends. No wonder that you fuck this kid around. You seek your friends with junkies. You're a joke on this street, you and him. (Buffalo, 80)

The kind of language that Teach uses is suggestive of loss of faith in the others. The treatment by Bobby and Don to Teach makes Teach use such foul language. It is the result of corrupt ways adopted by the two in dealing with a close associate like Teach. Don immediately responds to Teach by his viciousness stating he came to stick poison in him. He



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attacks Teach in next action. Teach is crumbled as the universe around him is tumbled. He is so disturbed that he picks up a crude metal weapon and begins to trash Don's shop screaming:

There is No Law. There Is No Right And Wrong. The World Is Lies. There Is No Friendship. Every Fucking Thing. (Pause) Every God Forsaken Thing... We all live like the cavemen... I go out there. I'm out there everyday. (Pause) There is nothing out there... I fuck myself. (American Buffalo, 82)

The kind of words that Teach uses signifies his frustration as failure. He realizes that the American world is full of lies and is evil. The corrupt business practices have led people astray and have become enemies instead of friends. There is nothing like friendship and people have become like the primitive beings. He is so despaired that he charges himself for his mistakes. He realizes his stupidity as all the mechanism of business is exposed. Free will of man has destabilized faith and fellow feeling. Teach's cry of despair is emblematic of his understanding that the American myth is all false. *American Buffalo* testifies Mamet's belief that the myth is false. In interviews, Mamet voiced his belief that corruption in the various circle of society is inextricably entwined and he has underscored this concept by classifying Nixon and Agnew as a pair of 'petty' thieves and Kissinger as a 'liar' and a 'cheat'. Several critics have noted that the actions of the three characters in the play are emblematic of mainstream American culture. In "Ethical Perversity in America," Jack Barbera (1981) presents explanations to characters' behaviour in *American Buffalo*:



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For “Buffalo” read the slang verb “to intimidate”. ... it is common for businessmen to buffalo the public: “The windfall profits tax will dry up America’s soil,” and “ If you don’t buy this laxative, no one will love you.”...Notions of the American way—democracy and free enterprise—become corrupted when they enter the look-out-for-number-one rationalizations of crooks and unethical businessmen... so robbing and cheating are attempts to restore justice. (Barbera, 275)

The play mirrors the fact that democracy and free enterprise lead to corrupt ways of life and similar is the experiences of the scholars in America of those times. The play attacks business ethics and ignores the other side of the coin – striving for balance. In the closing moments it highlights the importance of human relationship in characters’ lives. Teach has become egocentric, in fact, the Americans have turned egocentric and egocentrism leads to corrupt ways of life. Self-centeredness, selfishness is practice of the democratic Americans that make them ride the tide of success via corruption. Selfishness does not allow one to consider or think of the others. This happens in the case of Mamet’s protagonists. *American Buffalo* dismantles the American Dream by indicating the lack of ethical behavior in society. Humanity and spirituality are essential for gaining success in life. The author highlights this issue towards the end of the play. Both Bob and Don apologize each other for hurting. Conflict and tension arising out of business and friendship relationship place drastic demands on lives of the protagonists. The nickel coin is symbolic, it is valuable. Friendship is valuable for an individual and it is difficult to evaluate. Value of friendship cannot be interpreted in financial terms. People sometimes underestimate the value

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of a friend. Likewise Don neglects friendly relationship with Bobby. He cares only for money and business. Don disregards something that he should regard and protect at any cost. But the American dream has led the youngsters like Don to pay no heed to personal ties. Like every American, he is after money and success in business for which he is ready to surrender friendship and even attack anyone. The dream has disturbed psyche of the youngsters to such an extent that they have lost control over proper ethical use of language. A kind of viciousness is seen in the use of derogatory language full of sexuality.

Conclusion

The play *American Buffalo* makes reader and audience recognize the unhappy atmosphere in the country where people never attempted to differentiate between right and wrong. They have never paid attention to what is crime and what is not. Author has effectively dramatized the real situation of contemporary world where corruption and corrupt ways of life and business. The people have never learnt how to live a happy, peaceful, satisfied, contented life. They are never eager to accept the reality of life and to accept the given status of economy. They want to surge ahead to gain monetary gains at any cost. Their egocentric attitude does not allow them to realize that they are following unethical illegal ways of life in order to ride the wave of success. This has affected the individuals as well as the society at large. Such people are ideals and idols in the negative sense for the incoming generation.



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