

Need For Humanistic Approach In Education System: A Study On Humanism In David Mamet's 'Oleanna.'

Dr. M. Renuga¹, Dr. B. Kanchanamala², Dr. M. Saraswathy³

¹Professor & Head, Department of Humanities and Languages, Sona College of Technology, Salem, Tamil Nadu. India. Email id: renugam@sonatech.ac.in

²Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Languages, Sona College of Technology, Salem, Tamil Nadu. India. Email id: kanchana@sonatech.ac.in

³Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Languages, Sona College of Technology, Salem, Tamil Nadu. India. Email id: saraswathy@sonatech.ac.in

DOI: 10.47750/pnr.2023.14.02.67

Abstract

David Mamet, an American playwright, film maker and author, introduces the 'Student-Teacher' (Huebert-Leibler 1988) relationship in many of his plays. 'Oleanna (OL),' produced in 1992, is one such play where the main theme is teacher-student relationship. By bringing in a conflict between the teacher, John, and the student, Carol, Mamet points out the drawback in American Education System that "subverts and distorts the people within it" (Sauer 2003). He portrays the teacher as a man of free thought, patience and knowledge. He also underlines the importance of imparting practical and application-oriented knowledge and also stresses the need for breaking the constraints of conventional educational system. As Brenda Murphy (2004) states the play derives its title from the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and his wife Anna, who founded the Utopian Community Oleanna, which was named after the founders. Mamet wants to bring in a comparison between this community's failure in their agricultural endeavor and the failure in the American education system and hence this title. This paper scrutinizes 'Oleanna' to underline the need for humanistic approach in the academia.

Keywords: Education System, application –oriented knowledge, traditional teaching methodology, racial discrimination, humanism

Introduction

David Mamet, an American playwright, film maker and author, introduces the 'Student-Teacher' (Huebert-Leibler 1988) relationship in many of his plays. After examining Mamet's plays closely, Kane (1999) remarks that "Mamet's work is dominated by pedagogical relationships that constitute an implicit ethical contract." 'Oleanna (OL),' produced in 1992, is one such play where the main theme is teacher-student relationship. By bringing in a conflict between the teacher, John, and the student, Carol, Mamet points out the drawback in American Education System that "subverts and distorts the people within it" (Sauer 2003). He portrays the teacher as a man of free thought, patience and knowledge. He also underlines the importance of imparting practical and application-oriented knowledge and also stresses the need for breaking the constraints of conventional educational system. As Brenda Murphy (2004) states the play derives its title from the Norwegian violinist Ole Bull and his wife Anna, who founded the Utopian Community Oleanna, which was named after the founders. Mamet wants to bring in a comparison between this

community's failure in their agricultural endeavor and the failure in the American education system and hence this title. This paper scrutinizes 'Oleanna' to underline the need for humanistic approach in the academia.

The protagonist, John, is an Assistant Professor in a university. He takes steps to buy a new house for his family, based on his expectations to get a positive declaration from the Tenure Committee. Carol, is a student, who is undergoing a six month course. Only if she passes the course, she can get admission into the university. Since she fails to get a good grade in the course, she approaches John to get her doubts clarified. John, who does not believe in the conventional way of teaching, feels pity for Carol. He tries to ease her mind, but Carol gets bewildered. She mistakes John and joins with a group to get their advice to register a complaint against John. John, who is thoroughly shocked, calls the girl to his room to settle scores with her, but it works adversely resulting in the loss of his job and collapse in his plan of buying the house.

John believes in the freedom of thinking. He finds the present educational system 'Artificial' (Mamet 1993) and criticizes the "exploitation in the education process" (Mamet 1993). Hence, when Carol approaches him with her poor grades, he feels that he should save her from the pathetic situation: "I have no desire other than to help you" (Mamet 1993). As a kind and considerate teacher, he feels the need to help her. He wants to bridge the gap between the student and the educational system, which he adopts in the new line of thinking. Trying to instill confidence in her, he says: "You're an incredibly bright girl!" (Mamet 1993). John feels that the conventional education system, with all its tests and grading system, baffles the students and prevents the teacher from enthusing the students with the spirit of learning. That is why even in the class rooms, he goes beyond the traditional teaching methodology and imparts extra knowledge apart from prescribed lessons to the students.

As a teacher with a genuine concern for students, John feels the need to counsel Carol. He even goes to the extent of saying that he will call himself responsible for her failure and that he can teach her from the beginning: "We'll start the whole course over. I'm going to say it was not you, it was I who was not paying attention. We'll start the whole course over. Your grade is an 'A.' Your final grade is an 'A' " (Mamet 1993). He understands that she has a fear for examination. So he says that the tests are not worth attempting, because they "...were designed, in the most part, for idiots. By idiots" (Mamet 1993). On seeing that she is still worried about her grades and how to begin the course again when it is half way through, he consoles her saying, "If you will come back and meet with me. A few more times. Your grade is an 'A.' Forget about the paper. You didn't like it. You didn't like writing it. It's not important. What's important is that I awake your interest, if I can, and that I answer your questions. Let's start over" (Mamet 1993). He tries to motivate her and kindle her interest in studies. With all the knowledge he has, he is not proud and arrogant. He wants to use the power that his knowledge and experience have given him for constructive purpose.

John is portrayed as a man of patience and knowledge. He does not get annoyed even when Carol finds fault with his method of teaching or criticizes the books he has written and the literary jargons he uses in the class. Nevertheless, John attempts to explain the difficult or technical terms he has used in the class and continues to help her patiently. His expansive use of language and expressions of the subject stand testimony to the extent of his knowledge.

When John finds that Carol is tormented by the fear of failing and considers herself stupid, he takes a humanistic approach to sort out her problem. In spite of his busy schedule, he starts explaining to her how he himself suffered like her when he was young. Learning from his own experience, he tries to impart practical and application-oriented knowledge to the students. He does not stop with comparing his failure with hers. He advises her like a father, because he has once longed for such a care: "I'm talking to you the way I wish that someone had talked to me" (Mamet 1993). He has taken all his experiences in the right spirit. Though the society has treated him badly and has made him feel small, he does not want to return the same to the society. He wants to give his best to the student community by giving them whatever he has yearned for and whatever, he thinks, is good for them.

All humans possess the right to learn. Appreciating both the learners and the teachers' privilege, Corliss Lamont (1997) says,

The concept of educational democracy implies the administration of schools, colleges and other educational institutions, whether public or private, according to democratic principles, including nondiscrimination in admissions policy toward such minority groups as Jews and African-Americans. It also covers academic freedom. This means that all teachers and employees in school, college or university are entitled to full liberty of expression and association, as guaranteed under the Bill of Rights, without any interference or penalization on the part of the educational institution which employs them. Teachers have the right to speak their minds in the classroom, as long as they maintain the recognized standards of professional competence and scholarship. Students also have the right to voice their opinions and to join organizations of their choice.

This 'educational democracy' is violated in 'OL' in the cases of both John and Carol.

A just society should provide its people with good education. Discrimination among the students based on their race, caste, community, and country is thoroughly inhuman. Belonging to an under-privileged social class, students like Carol struggle to get admission into educational institutions. Carol's anxiety is reflected when she says, "Of hard working students, who come here, who slave to come here... – you mock us. You call education 'hazing,' and from your so-protected, so-elitist seat you hold our confusion as a joke" (Mamet 1993). She becomes wild when John criticizes the educational system. She does not understand that John is talking in favor of her. She mistakes him thinking that he is mocking at her for joining such unworthy educational institutions after a long struggle. Her anxiety explicitly shows that racial discrimination is still observed in the admission process.

Mamet presents Carol as a representative of the student community brought up by the imperfect educational system. As Kane (1999) observes, the playwright is concerned about "education of character" rather than the "nature or usefulness of higher education in America." The authority Carol demonstrates is an assumed power that is borne out of ignorance and impudence. She is blinded by the institutional rules which dictate terms to teachers as to how they should carry themselves in the class. Also, Carol is influenced by the policies of the 'political correctness' (Mamet 1993) which prevent the teachers from using certain words in the class. The policy which is implemented to avoid unpleasant atmosphere in the class is misused by Carol.

Carol understands neither the concepts taught by John nor his humanistic approach. She understands the need to voice her rights, and hence she joins a group which helps in raising her voice against John. But, the problem is that the group does not understand John's motives, either. It only lends a hand to Carol in misinterpreting John's language. Mamet says in an interview, "It (Oleanna) is a play about two people, and each person's point of view is correct. Yet they end up destroying each other" (Norman 2001). Mamet blames neither Carol nor John for this unhappy and unpleasant culmination. He feels that the need of the hour is a change in the present educational system, where the scope for 'human interactions' (Murphy 2004) should be improved.

John T. Christie (1953) in his essay titled "Humanistic Education in the West" says,

I feel it myself in a present day university where many students come from much more limited and uncultivated homes than was the case 30 years ago. The work of great minds is set before them, but they have been trained to study them solely with reference to 'examinations and they really believe once they have done' a book with a notes and a lecturer, they have, as it were, sucked the orange dry. I would say that until you sit down in tranquility and let the great mind do its work on you, you have not begun to understand what a great mind is.

The view that the students should be made to think is noteworthy. Christie criticizes that the education and examination system force people to study only to fair well in the examination and do not promote students' thinking skill. Mamet's protagonist believes in the humanistic outlook of kindling the spirit of learning in the students.

Carol, who is very skeptical, thinks that John is playing some tricks on the students. She feels that he has caused harm not only to her, but to the entire 'student body' (Mamet 1993). In the report, which she has submitted to the Tenure Committee, she has accused John as 'sexist' and 'elitist' (Mamet 1993). Without any enquiry, John is ousted and his 'liberty of expression' (Lamont 1997) is curtailed severely. Kane explicitly states, "It is simply too easy to dismiss 'Oleanna' as antifeminist, even misogynist. Male and female alike we understand that Carol's willful misinterpretation of the truth – however much it costs her – has little to do with the abolition of elitism and sexism. What we are speaking about here is fascism masquerading humanitarianism" (Kane 1994). If Carol had understood John's good intentions, things would have been positive and encouraging for both of them.

The playwright himself has undergone poor learning experience because of an 'unstructured curriculum' (Weber 2000). Apart from play writing and screen writing, he teaches in an art school. Hence, he realizes the need for reformation in the education system. Reviewer Austin remarks, "The play, while ambiguous in many ways, shows Mamet to be firmly on the professor's side" (Austin 1992). Through John, Mamet underscores the importance of creating a real learning atmosphere in the class maintaining a sense of decency and decorum. In his approach towards education, Mamet seems to believe in what Christie (1953) calls a solution to deal with students from varied background: "The only solution from our side is continued friendliness and sympathy with boys from widely different backgrounds, without a lowering of any of our intellectual standards." John, as a representative of Mamet's humanistic outlook, does all that he can to create a "vital atmosphere, throbbing with real, live interests" (Zaidi 1971) for learning.

Education or the process of learning is not only a life-long activity in any individual's life, it is also a global phenomena. In the present century, it has become very common for people to move from one country to another country to acquire standard education. Hence, it becomes essential to bring in a change in the educational system, which will encourage the spirit of learning and lead to intellectual awakening of the learner from any part of the world. If this is not taken care of, a student, who takes his education in the West, may find himself out of place, when he returns to his home in the East. These students, as John T. Christie (1953) puts,

May be fine flowers of culture, they are, so to speak, cut flowers, flowers in a vase with no root from which to perpetuate in their own families the education and outlook they have learned. This is an inevitable danger unless culture in its wider sense passes through the universities to the homes of the next generation.

Education should impart knowledge not only about the subject, but also about the culture of the learners. The standard of such education will enable a student to become a complete human being.

As a very important source of knowledge, education and its system need to be revised constantly. An inevitable aspect of this revision is the shift in emphasis, but care should be taken to ensure whether the shift is placed on the essential factor. In ancient India, for example, "Education aimed at reaching the goals set by Karma, Artha, Dharma and Moksha" (Kabir 1953). When there was a shift from active to contemplative life, there was a decline in the emphasis on creativity. In 'OL,' John tries to bring in a positive shift by breaking the traditional method of teaching, but the way he does it and the nature of the person on whom he tries result in a major setback.

Thus, it is important to create an education system throughout the world that is functional and up-to-date fulfilling the needs of the students ranging from local community to students across the globe. Though there cannot

be a common system throughout the world, a system with scope for accommodating changes and evolution should be adopted for establishing a healthy environment for both the teachers and the taught.

Through the negative attitude of Carol and John's failure as an educationist, Mamet expresses the need for reformation in the American education system and insists on the need for the humanistic outlook that both the educationists and educational institutions should uphold. Thus, in 'OL' the playwright succeeds in underlining the importance of humanistic approach in educational system.

References

1. Austin A. (1992), 'Mamet Debuts New play,' *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 May, pp. 13.
2. Christie J T. (1953), 'Humanistic Education in the West,' in *Humanism and Education in East and West – Essays written by the participants of An International Round Table Discussion organized by UNESCO, UNESCO, France.*
3. Hubert-Leibler, Pascale (1988), 'Dominance and Anguish: The Teacher-Student Relationship in the Plays of David Mamet,' *Modern Drama*, Vol. XXXI, No.4, December, pp. 557-570
4. Kabir H. (1953), 'The East and the Problems of Education,' in *Humanism and Education in East and West Essays written by the participants of An International Round Table Discussion organized by Unesco, France.*
5. Kane L. Ed., (1999), 'Weasels and Wisemen: Ethics and Ethnicity in the Work of David Mamet,' St. Martin's Press, New York.
6. Kane L. (1994), 'Oleanna,' *David Mamet Review*, Vol. 1, pp.1-2.
7. Lamont C. (1997), 'The Philosophy of Humanism,' Humanist Press, New York.
8. Mamet D. (1993), 'Oleanna,' Vintage Books, New York.
9. Murphy B. (2004), 'Oleanna: language and power,' in *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*, Ed., Christopher Bigsby, Cambridge University Press, London.
10. Norman G. and Rezek J. (2001), 'Working the Con,' in *David Mamet in Conversation*, Ed., Leslie Kane, The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
11. Sauer D K. (2003), 'Oleanna and The Children's Hour: Misreading Sexuality on the Post / Modern Realistic Stage,' in *David Mamet*, Ed., Harold Bloom, Chelsea House Publishers, Philadelphia.
12. Weber M. (2000), 'David Mamet in Theory and Practice,' *New England Review*, Vol.21, No.2 (Spring 2000), pp.136-41.
13. Zaidi S K. (1971), 'Education and Humanism,' *Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla.*