

**DISLOCATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM:
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON DAVID MAMET'S
AMERICAN BUFFALO**

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It is very difficult to define exactly what was the American dream and how it emerged because no single dream has attracted American people. There are many dreams as are the dreamers. From the very beginning American dreams have been based on facts and upward mobility such as, the exploration of west, opening of frontiers, invention of steam engine, building of rail roads and finally the perfection of space craft. The legendary hero of America is the self-made man. He represents the belief that any man can achieve fortune through the practice of hardwork, frugality, sincerity and honesty. But in many cases this theory did not work. It has rather generated pessimism and disillusionment. Very little is heard about those people who tried but failed. As celeste Macleod says there are "two interlocking premises supported the American dream unlimited opportunity and an endless frontier to provide that opportunity" (1980:3). But these days opportunities are shrinking. There are no more frontiers or undiscovered lands to conquer. Instead of dreams they have nightmares. In The water Engine, a play by David Mamet, which was first performed in 1977 Bughouse speaker complains:

What happened to this nation ?or did it ever exist ? did it exist with its freedoms and slogans... the buntings the gold headed standards, the songs with equality, liberty... In the west they plow under wheat. Where is America ? I say it does not exist. And I say it never existed. It was all but a myth. A great dream of avarice the dream of gentlemen farmer (1978: 64).

Mamet has exposed the hollowness of American dreams. His characters are in struggle with the existing system, which they think has made them incapable of achieving anything

substantial. They are all losers in the end. Disappointed by life they see only a bypass which can lead them to their goals. They are determined to achieve success whether it comes by fair or by foul means. Money, success and power are some of major motifs of the American dream which have found a permanent place in the psyche of the American people.

Mamet is concerned about the fact that the desire for money and power have even infiltrated the private lives. He sees that the traditional values of a society like friendship, loyalty, humanity, openness and hardwork are out-dated and are being replaced by enmity, betrayal, inhumanity and robbery. Instead of human relationships being valued only economic relationships are being practised.

In fact people have wrongly interpreted the meaning of the American dream they think that the American dream only means success, uncontrolled power and excessive wealth minus industry, honesty and sincerity. This perverted thinking has brought degradation in their morals, corruption in their public life and finally the dislocation of values. According to Mamet cut throat competition is justifying unethical work in the name of business. It has isolated people from one another. Mamet's sympathy lies with such people who are described by Pascale Hubert as the people "for whom the American dream never materialized" (1988:561). Mamet is fascinated by their efforts. But in the pursuit of American dream their hearts turn into stones, emotions dry up and language becomes devoid of feeling and sympathy. He found in the younger generation the problem of unemployment, livelihood, emotional and spiritual displacement. Mamet has succinctly expressed this feeling of contemporary American society in a lecture which he gave in 1979. Bigsby was so impressed by this that he begins his discussion of the play American Buffalo with these words as Mamet says, "I think that old order, whatever that means, the old America is finally finished... that the frontier, the commercial drive, the merchantile drive was in effect a fad no longer alive." (1985:63)

David Mamet is one of the stars of the Chicago theatre which was revived in 1975. He is one of the young American playwrights who is filled with energy and confidence. His plays are an incisive commentary on the dislocation of the American dream. He is gifted with hardedged street corner humour. Mamet is a prolific writer. His cannon so far consists of at least twenty-eight plays, of which seven are considered full length plays, others are short dramas. Several are monologues. He is also interested in cinema. His screen plays are The Postman always rings twice and The verdict. The chief source of energy in his plays is the music which he finds in every day speech, particularly in the conversation of ordinary people.

The seventies were the most appropriate period for a playwright like David Mamet. People were fed up of conventional drama. They were looking for a change. Mamet presented newer themes in a new style.

Though his first plays- The Duck variation (1972) and Sexual Perversity in Chicago, neither they nor the subsequent American Buffalo (1975) earned him immediate national attention. But when in 1979 the last mentioned play opened on Broadway, it was the year that four of his plays received their premier across America. All his plays posed genuine problems. Critics were baffled by the effectiveness of his plays. After six years American Buffalo was revived and now it is widely regarded as a classic. He won the Pulitzer prize in 1984 for Glengarry Glen Ross.

American Buffalo begins with a man in his late forties, Don Dubrow, talking to the much younger Bob about a man, Bob is supposed to watch. Teach enters Don's junkshop and while Bob is getting coffee learns of Don's plan to rob the man, Bob keeps on watching. Afterwards, the man spots a buffalo head nickel coin in Don's shop and purchases it for ninety dollars. Don who was unaware of the value of the small coin and its historical importance was surprised by the exchange. He thought that the coin collector has cheated him. He arrived at the conclusion that the man would have some more valuable coins with him. He made a plan to rob the coin collector's apartment. Teach talks Don into leaving Bob out of the robbery attempt and convinces him that Bob is too young. Since the robbery is his only chance in the dead end world

of the Junkshop, Teach intends to take it seriously. For this reason, he translates robbery into a business deal and begins negotiations by persuading Don that there would be little wisdom in including Bob.

Yet the business deal does fail finally because it never materializes. Fletch who is the only true link in the group is indeed in the hospital and Bob confesses that he did not see the collector leave the town after all. In short Don and Teach have been fooled and the robbery is cancelled. Teach disappears into the rainy night as Bob and Don draw together.

The story of American Buffalo revolves around a small coin which has the impression of a buffalo on it. The buffalo which once roamed freely in American forests has now become so rare that it is visible only on the face of the coin. The buffalo itself is a rich metaphor. Steve Lawson writes "the great beast reduced to a nickel; the mythical old west dwindling into a Junkshop" (1977:43). Thus it seems American dream has been transformed into money-making and the mode of attainment is shifted from hardwork to robbery. The more important thing is that the action which was the essential quality of the self-made man is replaced by inaction and fantasies. They talk much about action but do nothing. Don advises the much younger Bob, "Just one thing Bob, Action counts; Action talks and bullshit walks" (1976:4). Though he is teaching this philosophy to others he does not apply to his own life. Common people are fascinated by successful heroes yet at the same time they also blame them and feel that there are some unfair means behind their success. They cannot imagine that a person can ever be successful without using fair means. Everything in this society is measured by its commodity value. Even the cultural artefacts have lost historical importance and aesthetic pleasure. When Don says now a- days antique things are in fashion and people are buying and paying handsomely for these artefacts. Teach's immediate reaction is "If I kept the stuff that I threw out I would be a wealthy man. I would be cruising on some European yacht" (19). They do nothing throughout the play except drink coffee and eat yogurt, but their determination to do some work is quite interesting. Don thinks that three members gang will be more equipped

to meet any kind of eventuality. He argues, there must turned- be one man to watch the rears. Teach turned down this idea and comments, "You know what has rears, Armies" (52) For Teach this is only an opportunity to acquire wealth. He talks about robbery like a business deal. Teach is even prepared for violence. Therefore he equips himself with a gun so, God forbid, something inevitable occurs and the choice is (And I'm saying "God forbid") It's either him or us" (84).

Mamet sees no moral conduct and responsibility prevailing in contemporary American society. There is no force which binds people together. It is a culture of narcissism as Christopher Lasch titles his book with subsequent epithet American life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations. In this society people come together momentarily when they have a vested interest. As soon as that aim in fulfilled they are separated. People have lost faith in time tested morality and values. Teach gives a vulnerable definition of free enterprise which suits his own interests. He says, "You know what is free enterprise ?The freedom of the individual, to embark on any fucking course that he sees fit. In order to secure, his honest chance to make a profit Am I so out of line on this " (72-73).

American Buffalo ends on a optimistic note. Teach agrees to take Bob to the hospital. All three characters Don, Bob, Teach are united in the end. The bond may or may not be permanent as chritopherPurtfield has remarked," they draw together in a fragile bond of shared futility human cast offs alongside the inanimate ones." (1977:55). But for Mamet there still is a ray of hope. The coming together of all the three characters sets an example that only values, like friendship, loyalty, and humanity can sustain them. Otherwise they will remain separated and isolated. Beyond this there will be no communication among them. As pascale Hubert leibler points out correctly" Mamet's moral again and again, is that people are absurdly their own tormentors" (1988: 659).The only thing that can save them from loneliness is caring for others and helpingthem.

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