

Cultural Humanism in David Mamet's 'Edmond'

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

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

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

Abstract

A Pulitzer Prize winner, a Tony and an Oscar nominee, David Mamet is a promising American playwright with social concern and ethical insight. This paper examines the concept of cultural humanism in David Mamet's 'Edmond'(ED). The play is about a middle class man who undergoes a train of experiences to learn the lesson of life. In this play, Mamet takes a humanistic outlook by teaching the protagonist what life is through an expedition of experiences. The resultant maturity in thinking marks the character as a true human.

Keywords: Cultural humanism, rationalization, experiences, cataclysm, humanistic outlook

A Pulitzer Prize winner, a Tony and an Oscar nominee, David Mamet is a promising American playwright with social concern and ethical insight. This paper examines the concept of cultural humanism in David Mamet's 'Edmond'(ED). The play is about a middle class man who undergoes a train of experiences to learn the lesson of life. In this play, Mamet takes a humanistic outlook by teaching the protagonist what life is through an expedition of experiences. The resultant maturity in thinking marks the character as a true human.

'Edmond' was produced in 1982. With twenty three scenes, it exposes the darker reality of New York city which is the setting of the play. It is about a middle class man who undergoes a train of experiences to learn the lesson of life. According to Henry I. Schvey (1992), it is similar to "the morality play, and it reveals with a frightening explicitness Mamet's apocalyptic vision of a society bent upon self-destruction." 'ED' explicitly portrays Mamet's faith in cultural humanism.

That 'Knowledge of the universe can be obtained by observation, experimentation and rational analysis' (Humanism and its Aspirations 2003) is one of the basic tenets of cultural humanism, which is a

concept close to Mamet's dramatic theory. His characters, like people in real life, are always in their "obsessive search for success and individuality" (Kane 1992). For a country that has drifted far away from its past in terms of culture, politics, economics and religious tradition, living or passing each day itself is an experiment that fills the people with either seemingly gratifying experience or regretting and horrifying nightmare.

"Rationalism," as the 'New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary' defines, "is the belief that all behaviour, opinions, etc. should be based on reason rather than on emotions or religious beliefs (Hornby 2005)." Its basis is rationalization or reasoning out which is a special faculty of human beings. It is an old concept, as old as the earth or the history of humanity's existence itself. It encompasses the spirit of inquiry, capacity for observation and interest in experimentation and has helped humans to evolve through the ages to the present day. It has advanced science and led to Newton's 'Law of Specific Gravity' among other things. It can also be applied to everyday events and experiences. Only then self-knowledge leading to knowledge of the universe can be attained. According to Mamet, true knowledge about the world can only be obtained by the learner or the seeker

In this play, Mamet takes a humanistic outlook by teaching the protagonist what life is through an expedition of experiences. He tells Schvey (2001), "... Edmond is about – a man trying to discover himself and what he views as a sick society." The resultant maturity in thinking marks the character as a true human. Through Edmond's realization, Mamet also projects the fact that racial hatred is an inhuman attitude. The communion of the repenting soul with the external world, which is shown as an aftermath of Edmond's realization of his mistakes, is the most commendable turn the play takes.

The play begins with a fortune-teller telling Edmond, whose face looks wanting, that he does not belong to the place where he is at present. Edmond, who is already confused, comes home and tells his wife that he is leaving the house never to come back. He says that he is upset and dissatisfied with the kind of life he is living, because he says that he has realized that he does not love her. Adding insult to injury, he tells her that she does not interest him either spiritually or sexually. The wife, who is really annoyed, shouts at him to leave the house.

Edmond, who leaves the house with, "the assumed liberation of the individual" (King 2004), goes to a bar, peep show whore house, hotel, pawnshop, coffee house and an apartment of a girl called Glenna. Wherever he goes, he is found wanting money. He picks up quarrels with people, who try to cheat him. He kills a nigger, who threatens Edmond to give him money. He also kills Glenna and finally he is imprisoned. Then, he realizes that he deserves the punishment. 'ED' is one of the best examples of acquisition of knowledge through experiences.

The fortune teller of the first scene resembles the fortune-teller of 'The Shawl'. Mamet who rationalizes the tricks of the fortune-teller in Mamet's 'The Shawl' does not do so in 'ED,' because his intention is to make the character undergo an expedition to gain experience.

Even if Edmond has not met the fortune-teller, he would have left the house, because he has been feeling the emptiness within him for quite some time. As expected, he emerges strong as he undergoes a series of experiences, all of them teaching him bitter lessons invariably. He faces the stark reality of the outside world and regrets for taking a wrong decision by quitting the house.

Unlike the protagonist of Bunyan's 'The Pilgrim's Progress,' Edmond leaves the house in a quest for sensual pleasure, but ends up gaining knowledge about his own self and the world. The warning of the fortune-teller "The world seems to be crumbling around us" (Mamet 1983), provokes him to start his journey and accomplish his task before the world collapses. Unmindful of the misery he thrusts upon his

wife, he leaves the house. Wherever he goes, he finds deceitful people. But, as a wary business person, he does not lose money on anything, because he does not find things worthy of his money. His annoyance reaches its peak, when he finds a card-sharper trying to cheat him. When he attempts to expose the card-sharper and his friend, he gets severely beaten by the card sharper and the lady who is found along with the card-sharper.

In the hotel, even after seeing the injured Edmond, the clerk does not help him with information about making a call. He is shocked to see people who do not have a sympathetic attitude toward a person who is hurt so much. Hence, he bursts out: “You know if they need a dime or not. To get a dial tone...you know if they need a dime, for Chris sake. Do you want to live in this kind of world? Do you want to live in a world like that? I’ve been hurt. Are you blind? Would you appreciate if I acted this way to you?” (Mamet 1983). Through this experience, he learns about cruelty. He also understands how unkind he has been to his wife.

Edmond learns a valuable lesson from his experiences that he gets rid off his racial hatred for African Americans. It is a positive change that comes about in him. Unfortunately, the transformation takes place through a horrible experience. In an attempt to protect himself from an African American, Edmond stabs him with a knife and kills him. Though he has murdered in a furious moment, he says, he has realized that “THEY’ RE PEOPLE TOO” (Mamet 1983) and that his hatred and contempt for the race have gone away from him. He says: “In that moment thirty years of prejudice came out of me” (Mamet 1983). What he has committed is a crime, for which he undergoes legal punishment, but the lesson he learns purifies his self.

Edmond’s maturity of thinking can be observed during his conversation with Glenna. Now, he teaches Glenna that it is important to live in this world in the real sense of the word. He feels that people are not brought up in such a way to question and understand the meaning of their lives. He compares life with a school, but people are not interested in learning “...it’s more comfortable to accept a law than question it and live your life. All of us We’ve bred the life out of ourselves. And we live in a fog. We live in a dream. Our life is a school house, and we’re dead” (Mamet 1983). He feels that humans should develop the spirit for inquiry. He also understands that he has become strong, not just physically, but also mentally:

There is no history... there is just now ... and if there is a god he may love the weak, Glenna. (pause) but he respects the strong.(pause) And if you are a man you should be feared. (pause) You should be feared ... (pause). You just know you command respect (Mamet 1983).

Edmond’s words imply both the strength of his physique and his psychological maturity.

In the prison, as he converses with his cell mate, his talk reveals the depth of knowledge he has obtained about himself: “Every fear hides a wish. Don’t you think? ... I always knew that I would end up here. Every fear hides a wish. I think I’m going to like it here. ... In my whole adult life I don’t feel fearful since I came in here” (Mamet 1983). Since he has been having the fear that he will end up in prison, he says that he must have had the wish to be in prison. This shows that Edmond must have sensed the consequences of quitting his house. ‘Wish’ here does not really mean desire, but a justification for his action. He compares human beings with birds that sense the ensuing earthquake and flee from the place. He says that human beings too have their souls responding to ‘cataclysm.’ But humans “cannot flee. We’re fearful. All the time. Because we can’t trust what we know” (Mamet 1983). It is not a matter of trust, but a need for rationalization. If Edmond had rationalized his fear, in the beginning itself, he could have avoided all the miserable experiences.

The realization, which has come late, is born out of hands-on experience and hence Edmond trusts his senses and the 'soul' that responds to events happening around. This response is an essential quality of a humanist. "Soul," as the New Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines, is "a person's inner character, containing their true thoughts and feelings" (Hornby 2005). Edmond's 'soul' has been warning about the danger he is going to face, but Edmond ignored and hence this imprisonment. Alves (1971) in 'In Search of Freedom' says:

To respond, however, belongs to the sphere of freedom. Man responds because he discovers his world as a message which is addressed to him, as a horizon into which he can project himself. And when he responds the world becomes different. It becomes historical. It ceases to be the isolated sphere of nature and bears now the stamp of freedom. And precisely in this same act man becomes historical because he becomes different. Man, after response, is not the same as he was before. In the sphere of history both man and the world remain open-ended because the possibilities of the relations between them are never exhausted (Alves 1971).

Edmond, now, feels that he has become one with the world as his internal self-expands to be in communion with the external world. Paradoxically, he feels the freedom in a prison.

Edmond realizes that he is the sole reason for his present state. When the prison chaplain says that nothing is impossible for God and could fill him with pious feelings, Edmond gets annoyed:

If nothing's impossible to God, then let him let me walk out of here and be free. Let him cause a new day. In a perfect land full of life. And air. Where people are kind to each other, and there's work to do. Where we grow up in love, and in security we're wanted (Mamet 1983).

Edmond just expresses his disbelief in God. But, disbelief in God alone is not humanism. He also regrets for his mistakes. That is why he wants to start a 'new day.' He also feels and longs for all the humane qualities his country lacks, from fresh air to security.

In his conversation with the cell mate, Edmond tries to discuss the significance of all the happenings in his life. The conversation begins with a statement that since there is no control over their actions, there must be a destiny or a power that shapes their lives. Later, in the course of the discussion, Edmond relates this power to one's knowledge. His experiences have taught him the lesson to rely on his knowledge.

Many critics ask what moral does Mamet want to convey through 'ED,' because the play ends with the protagonist staying in prison. Mamet, as he states in '3 Uses of the Knife,' has thrown open the choices in front of the audience, because

When (either through the triumph or the ennobling failure of the protagonist), the correct choice is vouchsafed to the audience, its members can say, and will, say smugly, 'And did I not know it all the time? I knew that homosexuals, blacks, Jews, women were people too. And, lo, my perceptions have been proved correct' (Mamet 1998).

The playwright wants his audience to travel with Edmond, but not get affected, and see for themselves what is right and wrong. Christiansen (1982), observes, "'Edmond' is a play of shattering yet exhilarating ferocity. Its savagery, which summons up the demons in all of us, is cleansing. And, for all

its brutality, it is ultimately a most humane and compassionate work.” The brutal reality exposed in the play purifies the audience and the readers.

Thus, Mamet projects the humanistic credo of learning through life’s experiences in ‘ED’. He wants his audience to understand the need for rationalization and take responsibility for their actions as Edmond does. Consequently, the actions they do will be guided by humanistic outlook.

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