

Under the Veneer of Words Lies Power: Foucauldian Analysis of *Oleanna*

D. Arjmandi

Abstract—The notion of power and gender domination is one of the inseparable aspects of themes in postmodern literature. The reason of its importance has been discussed frequently since the rise of Michel Foucault and his insight into the circulation of power and the transgression of forces. Language and society operate as the basic grounds for the study, as all human beings are bound to the set of rules and norms which shape them in the acceptable way in the macrocosm. How different genders in different positions behave and show reactions to the provocation of social forces and superiority of one another is of great interest to writers and literary critics. Mamet's works are noticeable for their controversial but timely themes which illustrate human conflicts with the society and greed for power. Many critics like Christopher Bigsby and Harold Bloom have discussed Mamet and his ideas in recent years. This paper is the study of *Oleanna*, Mamet's masterpiece about the teacher-student relationship and the circulation of power between a man and woman. He shows the very breakable boundaries in the domination of a gender and the downfall of speech as the consequence of transgression and freedom. The failure of the language the teacher uses and the abuse of his own words by a student who seeks superiority and knowledge are the main subjects of the discussion. Supported by the ideas of Foucault, the language Mamet uses to present his characters becomes the fundamental premise in this study. As a result, language becomes both the means of achievement and downfall.

Keywords—Domination, foucault, language, mamet, oleanna, power, transgression.

I. INTRODUCTION

DAVID MAMET is one of the rare dramatists of 20th century who has the ability of showing the conflict and harassment between genders realistically. Mamet's plays are paramount in the portrayal of the modern social and psychological issues. Replete with the controversial concerns of the modern era like the idea of individualism and the process of changing in the capitalist society, his plays are still the main topic of discussion of many critics. He shows the society's hunger for the fulfillment of the dreams, lack of certainty, difficulty in communication, explicit conflict between genders and the thirst for power. In Mamet's drama he "problematize[s] the possibility of making objective judgments" as Sauer suggests [1]. *Oleanna*, Mamet's masterpiece, published in 1992, is a play about the downfall of communication and suspicion in relationships. *Oleanna* is one of the best examples of showing the struggle between male and female figures to be dominant and to search for a superior position. This Pulitzer prize winner represents the corrupted

minds, obsessive with the social movements and the codes of behavior, which are defined by the commotions.

What Mamet skillfully conducts, like Pinter and Beckett, is the depiction of complexities of language and how it switches between genders in different times. Language is a tool in the hand of an expert writer to show how it can change the values, thoughts and also cause misinterpretation and disasters. Through words he shows characters and action as Bruster has mentioned "Mamet feels that language often precedes and prompts both action and thought" [2].

In *Oleanna*, the dramatist presents us a very smart conversation between a teacher and a student, a man and a woman with totally two different positions in society. Then the conflicts sparkles and the two begin imposing their thoughts, obviously their words toward each other. The discourses and conversations in this play are highlighted with the idea of sex discrimination and biased positions. At a glance it is a play about a girl, Carol, afraid of failure and about a successful professor, John, who is going to receive tenure; but most of all about differences of using language and power domination.

II. FOUCAULT, POWER DOMINATION AND DIALOG

In order to have better understanding of Mamet's adaptation of language, theories of Foucault are pragmatic to be applied on. Foucault and his theories about power, domination, transgression and dialog are of supreme importance in 20th century among postmodernist thinkers. What Foucault considers as the very essential and indispensable part of our presence in the society and also as active members involved in the history of the day "is the hazardous, open-ended conflict or dialog of forces" [3]. He opens up new doors toward history and social dialog and makes the humans search for a different vantage point in the very simple but fixed ideas which he justifies are not that reliable. The unavoidable aspect of dialog, this conflict, Foucault asserts can lead to transgression, freedom and at last change [3].

What is important to understand is that Foucault plays with the very basic keywords in postmodernism like language and its capacities to change, forms and absolute power and also the idea of other and order. Domination, as an inseparable part of the conflict, is one of the cores of social dialog. By domination, he means "dialogical interplay of forces" [3]. One knows simply that there is no way to understand one another except that "the other can simply reveal or disclose itself to us" [3]. After revealing the intentions and thoughts there is this play of language and words between the people who are involved in a dialog and as a result there would be the play of

Diba Arjmandi is an M.A. Student of English Literature in Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Shiraz University, Iran (e-mail: Diba.Arjmandi@gmail.com).

unreachable reality under the veneer of words. Language becomes the best means to express and also to interpret what has been expressed. By the means of knowledge, the human being can reach new forms of dialog and, as a result, a new form of domination. Joseph Rouse in his article asserts that “new kinds of knowledge” [4] can lead to the establishment of “new forms of social dialog” [4]. That is what David Mamet has provided: new plays of social dialog in academia between different agents.

III. THE BATTLE OF DIALOG IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Oleanna is a three-act play with two opposite-sex characters and a simple setting of an office in a university. In a short glance, the reader would understand that setting is just a means, without any attraction, just a location, a place for keeping characters in touch without any specific details. Robert Skloot has mentioned that “One important difference between Oleanna and the plays that precede it in Mamet’s work lies in its more ‘cultured’ location” [5]. The office in a university, specifically, is a place of communication, for making comments and encounter with academic issues. So Mamet, instead of planning complex setting for making space to invent events, puts the spotlight on the battle of genders which happens through words.

Battle or conflict begins from the first moment of birth when we are part of a macrocosm which rules over us by its restraints. Judgment of the mass, ideology and different systems in the society shape the identity of the child. Through Foucault’s vantage point in the formation of the self and the influence of the society and history on him, one understands “no matter to what degree we impose ourselves on our surroundings, we can never entirely master them” [3]. So he rejects an agent’s outright control of infinite power of an entity or a community. In Oleanna, the idea of language and discourse sharpens the divergence and contradiction between genders. That is where the reader is supposed to grasp the unfathomable strife between Carol and John in their dialogs. Christopher Bigsby describes the drama of Mamet “in which need is as evident as the failure of experience to address it” [6]. It suggests the difficulty to measure the acts and words of characters simply and certainly. It also shows that there is always loss of something, a failure in struggling to give meaning to everything. But to what extent has Mamet been successful to show the failure of words?

What has led Mamet to write in such a provoking way, is his enthusiasm for the subject of “authority of pedagogy” [5] and also the role of a female character to challenge the authority of a professor from a higher position. How this violation of norms in the conversation between the characters goes on, needs the close reading of the play. How does this authority work in the language of the characters? How do they face the conflict? In what way is John superior to Carol? How does Mamet show the idea of transgression and freedom? Is there any shift in the “forms of domination” [3]?

IV. THE IGNITION OF THE DISCOURSE-BATTLE THROUGHOUT THE ACTS

John’s promised position of receiving tenure has let his family change their past condition of living. He is a highbrow professor, still waiting for a rise in his stand. Carol is in John’s office for the intention of asking questions related to John’s classes. She complains over her inability to understand the language which John uses.

CAROL: No, no, no. I’m doing what I’m told. It’s *difficult* for me. It’s *difficult*...

JOHN: ...but...

CAROL: I don’t ... lots of the *language*...

JOHN: ...please...

CAROL: The *language*, the “things” that you say... [7].

Carol clearly shows her lack of understanding when she repeatedly asserts that John’s talking is unfathomable for her. She has problems with the basic means of communication which is John’s language. Here there is the question of passivity and activity of a listener. John who represents the active speaker in the class, feels responsible toward a student like Carol who has not grasped what was supposed to be understood through his words. From Foucault’s vantage point both Carol and John are active participants and the listener, though silent, is not a passive entity without any influence in this order. Both the teacher and student act as “active beings, capable of organizing and interpreting the world in turn” [3].

Though John is in charge of the class and also the head of this small community of teacher and students, he does not have the absolute power. John acts as an “agent” [4] in this “exercise of power” [4] and he is totally dependent to the response he receives from the other active participant. Rouse has commented on Foucault’s view about power and its possession by an agent when he asserts “Power is not possessed by a dominant agent, nor located in that agent’s relations to those dominated, but is instead distributed throughout complex social networks” [4]. Thus Foucault believes power is not only in control of one agent and it can be concluded that John cannot be the only person in control of incidents; but Carol also has this ability to practice what John lacks sometimes. As a result the concept of power and its possession only by one community or individual is denied.

In the first act, John is attentive to his status as the upper-hand position of domination and he holds to it through the guidance he gives Carol. In some lines in act one John emphasizes on his duty as a teacher, defining it as “To provoke [you]... To force you...” [7]. Skloot believes that Mamet’s aim of depicting these characters was to “raising (but not resolving) questions about the use and abuse of power in the profession of teaching” [5].

But one should also think about the very notion of “using” [5] and “abusing” [5] the language. Apparently John’s phrases in some cases are unusual in his status through what pedagogy relationship has been defined. For instance when he tells Carol about the reason he wants to help her “Because I like you” [7] he follows his speech with saying the reason of this feeling as “Perhaps we’re similar. (Pause) Yes. (Pause)” [7]. What John sees in Carol is a girl, afraid of her future because of insecure

position in academia and society. That is what John himself has encountered in his past. So he begins revealing his thoughts and emotions, his weaknesses he felt from the beginning of his career since his present status to a student, in an inferior academic position.

His unintentional but clear confessions of his weaknesses and his wishes make him defenseless in his future confrontation with Carol. John forgets the fact of Carol's asking for help: not understanding John's language. His insistence on helping Carol and his naivety in expressing his thoughts entrap him in the worst case of accusations. This shift of power appears in the beginning of act two and the total change in this cycle is in act three when Carol becomes the absolute speaker who shows no deficiency in taking the control of dialog. But how does this process of submission change to transgression?

Carol, the other agent in the dialog is aware of the defined structural ordering as she says to John "I did what you told me. I did, I did everything that, I read your *book*, you told me to buy your *book* and read it" [7]. Carol, helpless in her struggle, shows silence to the authority of John's knowledge in the beginning. Foucault astutely recognizes that if one believes the silence the opponent shows, throughout the hierarchy and ordering, is the result of "the fear we [those with controlling power] have inspired in them" [8], he might be "over-optimistic" [8]. Foucault believes that the silence in the presence of the other agent might be "the failure to produce any such fear at all" [8] and Carol is the representative of the temporary reticence when she has neither the knowledge of her opponent agent's weaknesses nor the power and confidence to transgress. But the hidden reality is that there is also no sense of fear. She reminds John of her inferior stand when she emphasizes on the class structure and her level of rising into society.

CAROL: It is true. I have problems...

JOHN: ...every...

CAROL: ...I come from a different social...

JOHN: ...ev....

CAROL: a different economic... [7].

Carol's opinion of herself, a degrading view toward her position in the society highlights the anger she feels, the lack of power toward her teacher and academia. She is the one who "sit[s] there ... in the *corner*. In the *back*." [7] and cannot prove her presence in the atmosphere she is captured in. What the reader sees after the first act is the total change in Carol's language and her "deliberate self-transformation in Foucault's sense" [9], when she becomes part of a bigger and stronger community that gives her new identity, voice and language.

The group which Carol becomes part of gives her the sense of belonging she was searching in the beginning. This reveals her sense of lack and instability and also the need she meets since entering the college. The group with its power is a safe shelter for the people like Carol who are in search of new identity to gain voice. But this again can be measured with the factors like abusing the power and domination it can have over other inferior agents.

John is also entangled in another classification which is part

of the higher education system. This entrapment is "by Tenure Committee and, beyond it, the entire structure of higher education" [5] that try to suppress the other inferior forces. John who is displeased with this system, complains over high education as if it is the misuse of time: "I came *late* to teaching. And I found it Artificial" [7]. In consequence of John's assertion Carol become disappointed because of John's explicit speech about academic education and the waste of time in university. Meanwhile John is ignorant of discrediting his own occupied position in college with his own words. Identity of John, the way the student knows him, has been shaped through the job he has and when he begins debasing his own profession, he is indeed invalidating his own identity.

This unwillingly under questioning of his status makes Carol come into a transformation and self-realization of other capacities she can have toward a superior agent. She searches for the gaps that John's power is not filling. The authority she gains is from "calling into question that which is presented to us as necessary" [9].

Some harsh critics on Mamet claim that "perhaps unknowingly, Mamet's plays reveal a resistant femininity that exposes blindness in masculine perceptions of women" [10]. But more than being biased against women, John shows ignorance in his confrontation to Carol. John, naïve of being abused by his own words, shatters the stand he has taken as a superior force and takes off the mask of the constitution of domination and power which he believes is absurd. Here one can see the very delicate borders of domination and its easy destruction through the interaction of forces. No one is the ultimate superior with regards to social order as Falzon in explanation of Foucault's idea affirms that "it is the very complexity of social order which puts it beyond the reach of any master plan" [3]. Mamet gives enough motivation to provide Carol's transgression and revolt against John when she tells him "Do you know what you've *worked* for? *Power*. For *power*" [7]. Falzon explains this revolt in Foucauldian sense as "animating principle, the driving force, of historical dialog, giving motion to the interplay of forces" [3]. John's vulnerability gives enough power to Carol to exercise her authority in the new form of dialog. John is bereft of words before Carol's sexual-harassment accusations and his emphasis on his innocence are interrupted by Carol's strong self-assertion. Marc Silverstein believes that Carol is not yearning for John's position, but for "*verbal* power ... the power... to have the last word" [11]. The dynamic shift of power from John to Carol clarifies the very unreliability of language and its instable condition. Focusing on the last scene when John, representative of elitism, begins acting violently, we are confronted with the total ruin of John's future, his position and his influence. He shows his internal anger physically when the sad reality of loss of everything is clear to him. Carol wins the play of social dialog though physically she is hurt. The shift of power to Carol and her verbal domination is complete when in the end of the play, John forgets his position as a teacher and loses his self-control. The play ends when Carol is on the floor, beaten by her teacher. But in fact she has won the game she has started as an

apprentice and in the end finishes it as a master.

V.CONCLUSION

Through the passage of time, human being has found itself more powerful in nature and taming the world, in discovering and conquering its surrounding. But what has not yet been surmounted, is the human language and the its controlling power. What great thinkers and authors like Foucault, Beckett and Mamet suggest is the infinite aspects of language and the complex system of mastering it. The ideology and the language the society injects to human beings and the never ending cycle of domination of one norm and its shift to the other, are the basic discussions which these people show there is no answer to them. There would be no absolute power and as a result no absolute controller; as our world is in the constant shift of norms and rules and there are always people with new power to master the social dialog and gain enough power to attract new agents and forces. We are inseparable part of this huge never ending cycle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Professor Farideh Pourgivi for her kind support in the process of writing this paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] D. K. Sauer, "Oleanna and *The Children's Hour*: Misreading Sexuality on the Post/Modern Realistic Stage." *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: David Mamet*, Ed. H. Bloom, United States of America: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp. 203-225.
- [2] D. Bruster, "David Mamet and Ben Jonson: City Comedy Past and Present." *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: David Mamet*, Ed. H. Bloom, United States of America: Chelsea House Publishers, 2004, pp. 41-56.
- [3] C. Falzon, *Foucault and Social Dialog*. London: Routledge, 1998. pp. 9-54.
- [4] Rouse, Joseph. "Power/Knowledge." *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Ed. Gary Gutting. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 95-111.
- [5] R. Skloot, "Oleanna, or, the Play of Pedagogy." *Gender and Genre*, Eds. C. C. Hudgins, L. Kane, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 95-107.
- [6] C. Bigsby, "David Mamet." *The Cambridge Companion to David Mamet*. Ed. C. Bigsby, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp.1-40.
- [7] D. Mamet, *Oleanna*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.
- [8] M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, Ed. C. Gordon et al. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. p.87.
- [9] A. Allen, "Foucault and the Politics of Our Selves," *History of the Human Sciences*, 2011, vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 43-59.
- [10] S. Price, "Disguise in Love: Gender and Desire in *House of Games* and *Speed-the-Plow*." *Gender and Genre*. Eds. C. C. Hudgins, L. Kane, New York: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 41-59.
- [11] M. Silverstein, "'We're Just Human': Oleanna and Cultural Crisis." *South Atlantic Review*. South Atlantic Modern Language Association, May. 1995, pp. 103-119.