



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Minimalism in Mamet's Play *Romance*: A Postmodern Study

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#### ABSTRACT

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The research intends to analyze David Mamet's play *Romance* from a minimalist point of view, which is one of the characteristics of postmodernism and discusses the art that is small but imparts more meaning through deep analysis of the text. The context of the play has been studied through Warren Motte's insight of minimalism which as the theoretical framework. The undertaken research is qualitative in nature. Moreover, the crucial point in this research is to highlight objective repetition and the intended reduction of means to amplify the text in the postmodern context to see how solidly the effect of minimalism approves to the context of the selected text. The researcher finds out that the weird discourse makes the characters unexceptional individuals who represent disunity among the people of American socio-political and religious systems and that Mamet has presented entropy and fragmentation in his play *Romance* to highlight the corrupt judicial system in America

#### Introduction

A political or social ideology is presented through discourse in the American modern theatre. In this theatre, Mamet, Shepard, and Rabeun suspiciously stand in the second generation of the American theatre though in the group of first-generation are Miller, Williams as well as Albee (Cohn). In Mamet's theatre, there is a representation of American corrupt society, which is presented through the use of various techniques of language and discourse. In this theatre, Mamet has presented his play *Romance* which unveils the American corrupt judicial system through the intended reduction of ideas and the limited use of language.

David Mamet is direct so his use of language is concerned and his subject matter is also clear and direct along with his characters that use the fractured syntax. He intentionally makes his conventional plot as absent from the play. In Mamet's theatre, language remains dominant than any other thing of the play (Bigsby, 2004). Along with his use of language, Radavich (1991) puts it that "Mamet's theatre or drama revolves around men with the perspective of homosexuality, phobia of other's violation, a strong wish for the friendship of male members of the society, and search for the upper handedness and acceptance of the value of the dramatic conflict" (1991, p. 7). The use of language in the plays of Mamet and the characters introduced by him make him a playwright of the postmodern age as he presents through his characters and language the idea of fragmentation and disorder as is ample from his play *Romance* in which he introduces unexceptional characters and fragmented language to impart the context of the postmodern epoch. So, he, due to his techniques of writing and presenting his art, can be considered as a postmodern writer.

The play *Romance* deals with the judicial case against a Jew defendant who is in the court for an unspecified crime. There are two lawyers – the prosecutor and the defence attorney—who try to proceed the case but the judge keeps on discussing his personal experiences of life without paying attention to the case. In the background of the play, there is an issue of peace among the Arabs and the Jews. When the case is being preceded, the defendant suggests that he can bring peace in the region of the Middle East but he requires his release to go to the peace conference. The judge agrees to go with him but till that time the peace conference is over without the decision of peace and the play also ends in this way without the decision of the defendant's case in the court.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Justice System and Social Justice**

Rawls (1999) talking about the function which justice performs, says that justice is the basic requirement of the social institution and it is like the truth in structures of the school of thought in which the untrue theory is rejected despite its being more than well-designed and similarly, the unjust laws however elegant, need to be terminated from this institution to give inviolability to each member of the social structure but the only thing that to be safe from the greater injustice, less injustice is bearable (Rawls, 1999). It is clear from the Chomsky's reply to Foucault about the judicial process in the social institution as: "some degree of injustice can only be justified on the basis of the claim and the assessment – which always ought to be undertaken very, very seriously and with the good deal of skepticism – that this violence is being exercised because a more just result is going to be achieved" (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, p. 53).

Rawls develops the concept of society to define social justice with its principles. He says that the individuals recognize their relation to one another according to certain and obligatory rules for their dealing and they do not disobey

these constructed norms by themselves. The rules which they make, organize a structure for them to make their communion stronger and they cooperate with one another for their mutual advantages. In order to get equality, they make a set of rules and regulations through which they make some agreements for just share of advantages according to the participation of the individual. These rules serve the purpose of social justice which gives further explanation of the individual's rights, as well as duties and also these rules, explain an individual's burden and his share for advantages (Rawls, 1999).

### **Principles of Justice**

Rawls (1999) gives the concept of theory of justice that the principles of fairness that explain the social structure are the body for the agreement of the justice system. The rational people make some choice for equality and liberty and also, they set particular suppositions for the solution of the problem in that choice. These choices for the individual as well as social benefits postulate the rules or regulations – "the principles of justice" (Rawls, 1999, p. 10).

### **Functions of Court and Justice**

The court, in Foucault's (1980) word, is not a natural countenance of justice in its right form, rather it is ensnared and controlled by the historical functions of this institution as there is always previous practices in the institution of justice which holds the traditional experiences of the state (Foucault, 1980). A court is a place where the upper-class rules according to its benefits as Foucault takes the example of the people's court in the days of the revolution when the court stood between the bourgeois and the proletariat as a mediatory performer but it – the mediatory court – convicted the priests and the other people of no power but on the other hand, it executed the previous convicts of the ancient regime (Foucault, 1980).

It is also clear from Foucault's discussion with Victor about the court which functions according to the power vested over it, but his debate with Chomsky also puts light on his conception of justice as he opines that justice is a phenomenon which acts in the form of some political or economic power instrument which may be for power or against power. In other words, "the notion of justice itself functions within a society of classes as a claim made by the oppressed class and as justification for it" (Chomsky & Foucault, 2006, pp. 54 - 55).

The current study fills the gap by discussing the American legal and justice system presented through the selected play from the perspective of Motte's theoretical insight of minimalism to present *Romance* as a postmodern play. The study highlights the techniques of minimalism and also points out the reasons for using the unexceptional characters and randomly chosen art in the selected play.

### **Material and Methods**

The methodology of a research work defines the direction of the research and paves the ways it is going towards in near future. The researcher has gone through various books, journal articles and interviews. As the methodology is interpretative in nature, qualitative methodology has been used for the content analysis.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Modernism aims at studying literature as an individual's attempt to abandon the traditional and conventional thoughts. It has changed the existing approach – myths, fantasy, and gradual progress of society, towards literature through the foundations of science, reason, and individual estrangement. Childs opines that modernism “is characterized by the attempt to place humanity and in particular human reason at the centre of everything, from religion and nature, to finance and science”(Childs, 2000, p. 16).

But in response to this theory, Butler says that there appears an attitude of no real truth except relativity rather there is an imitation and reflection of art in some way as the reader generalizes the truth with relation to the other things. Butler defines this attitude as “a typical postmodernist conclusion, that universal truth is impossible, and relativism is our fate”(2002, p. 27). Lyotard opines that postmodernism is the condition of reading the culture. It is the study of science, literature, and art. He describes postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarrative”(1984, p. xxiv). Butler giving his views says that postmodernism studies art and culture, fragmented and in scattered form. It is a theory about the social, political, ethical, and philosophical schools. It disseminates the study of art and literature in a new form of disunity and enhances the study of art in liberation. The idea of the art of postmodernism consists of a sceptical attitude (Butler, 2002). In this sense, Nicol suggests that it is a credo of notions opposite to that of modernism. It is an extended form or the response to the modernism theory (Nicol, 2009).

Postmodernism presents art as the study of the representations of truth and not the truth itself. It comments on the appeal of the art in its perspective and not in the text independently. It consists of the part of philosophy that is critical, scattered and hostile to the connected pieces of art and knowledge as Butler says, "postmodernism thus involved a highly critical epistemology, hostile to any overarching philosophical or political doctrine, and strongly opposed to those 'dominant ideologies' that help to maintain the status quo"(2002, p. 40). In this way, Minimalism appears taking roots from postmodernism as Herzinger says about minimalist writings as “Postmodernist tendencies - irony, self-reflexiveness, conspicuous structural invention, overt concern with the limitations of language, and the rejection of traditional storylines - are back grounded in the new fiction” (1985, p. 12). Minimalism deals with a certain aspect of the postmodern movement as it is one of the characteristics of postmodernism. Thus, in this context that minimalism is a postmodern characteristic; it is pertinent to study minimalism in a broader context as a framework for the study of the selected play.

One of the notions of minimalism is being 'small'. This is one of the key considerations as Motte says, "small is a slippery, uncertain word, always relative and heavily dependent on context" (1999, p. 3). It is a style of writing in which the reader is free to conclude according to the context of his or her study. It is used contrastively with an object to be measured. The reader's approach to things that are small is closer though with hesitation and the larger thing is not as close (Motte, 1999).

According to Motte, another consideration of minimalism is being simple or the notion of 'simplicity'. It is also invoked in opposition to the other things. The things that are not simple, are complex, embellished, and not plain but "simple things are free from complexity, devoid of intricacy or ruse, unembellished, unaffected, plain" (Motte, 1999, p. 4). The simple things are more natural than other things. Though the simple thing seems artless yet it is free from artistic vacuity which is not the consideration of minimalism but vacuity is intentionally omitted from the work to avoid the conventional aesthetics of narration. So, the idea of smallness and that of simplicity meet at an idea of lessening; a term used clearly for minimalist aesthetic (Motte, 1999).

Thus, it can be seen that the above-mentioned elements of minimalism take art as small but intended to interpret it in various and larger ways to impart more and more meanings. In these contexts, minimalism deals with the work that has smallness, simplicity, amplification, immediacy, and clarity. So, these features of minimalism are taken to analyse the selected text.

### **Textual Analysis**

This portion of the study explores the techniques of minimalism used in the selected text. It puts lights on the writer's use of the techniques of minimalism and also the reason for making his characters as unexceptional. This section further puts light on the ideas that are randomly chosen. The researcher focuses on the narrative techniques of minimalism and the literal meaning of the text for the context of the study.

The play starts abruptly as the writer has intentionally amplified the text through the reduction of action or an object. The text is apparently simple and fragmented but it presents the narration and the dialogues which shows a form of intimacy. The 'court' in the play is presented as a place for masses to present their cases but it is not meant for justice. The writer has satirized the American judicial system through this court in the play because the court presents an entropic view of the socio-political life. The whole order in the court is fragmented in the whole play from its start to the end, which makes it as an unexceptional one. As the first dialogue of the prosecutor is in the present tense which shows that the prosecutor is talking about the current situation and not about some previous act but the defendant tells that he has no idea:

Prosecutor: Who is the person in the hotel room?  
Defendant: I have no idea.  
Prosecutor: You were there. You were seen there.  
Defendant: By whom?  
Prosecutor: Just answer the question, please.  
Defendant: Then please may I be addressed with one?  
*Pause.*  
*Pause.* Would you please address me with a question?  
*Pause.* 'You were seen there' is not a question.  
Prosecutor: Just answer the question as you've been directed (Mamet, 2005, p. 145).

The present tense in the first dialogue shows that the prosecutor talks about the phenomenon that is unknowable as the defendant who is in the court cannot know about the situation in the hotel room. The prosecutor wants to have an idea about the person who is not present but was a part of the past event. The use of the word 'please' in the dialogue of the prosecutor shows that he is not authoritative and just wants in some way the answer from the defendant about the person in the hotel. In response to the dialogue cited above, the defendant also utters the word 'please' which shows that he does not want to be a victim of the contempt of the court. This word also shows the interdependency of the prosecutor and the defendant on each other as both want from each other the means of their own advantages and they also want to terminate the case as soon as possible though with different results. The defendant utters three sentences with two pauses which show the static state of his mind and of the court as the pause is a symbol of fragments and limits of something.

In respect to the questions of the prosecutor, the defence attorney tries to abject the questions and says that the questions are the rude attitude of the prosecutor because he is hired by the defendant and tries to turn the discussion of the case to save his client from the retribution. This entire situation presents that there are no peaceful circumstances in the court of the present age of entropy. The judge wants to have peace because he is suffering from mental disharmony and panic due to the complexities of life and time. This idea of peace in the court seems randomly chosen because the writer amplifies the idea of peace to make it more appealing for the audience. The judge wants peace of mind and peace in the courtroom:

Judge: One moment. May we not have peace?  
*Pause.* Is that such a strange word? You will forgive me if I pontificate a moment. Will you? If I speak of peace. Is that not the theme of the week?  
Prosecutor: It is the theme of the weak. The theme of the strong, Your Honor, if I may, is truth (Mamet, 2005, p. 146).

The judge interrupts and asks for a moment because he wants peace in the court. The prevailing situation of the questions of the prosecutor and the response of the defendant and the defence attorney has created an environment of hostility in the court because the defendant does not agree to the questions and also there is no other witness to prove the offense. This type of court and the situation has made the court unexceptional as it is unable to provide justice and to hear any case. Not only the conversation between the characters presents the disturbance in the court but also the mind of the judge is not stable to the case and he asks for a little moment of peace. When he asks for peace, there is a pause in the discussion of the lawyers which grasps the attention of the reader towards the issue of peace. This pause shows that the other characters also feel the absence of peace but unable to restore it. This word 'peace' has immediate aesthetic on the characters and the readers of the play and it is because this universal theme of peace is absent not only from the representation of the court but also from the overall environment of the socio-political life in America. The parade represents disorder and noise all around and in the life of the judge who wants to be silent for his peace of mind as:

Judge: Curiously, I was late because of the parade. I took my *pill*, but I could not remember if I had taken my pill. As they do tend to make one groggy. So I returned to my house. To, to, to take my 'pill', which rendered me late as, on my leaving the house, I encounter the parade. [*pause.*] I would have been on time if not for the ...

*Pause*

Defence Attorney: Of course, Your Honor.

Judge: Parade. A policeman. *Stopped* them, for a moment. Just to let me through. He didn't have to do that. He had no idea who I am. Call me a weepy old fool.

*Pause*

(Mamet, 2005, p. 149).

The pauses in the dialogue of the judge show that he is limited by the language and unable to express his ideas and emotion in the court about the peace and disturbance into the court and his mind. This technique of silence as a tool of communication presents the reflection of the postmodern age and the fragmentations in the order of the linguistic role. The judge tells that the two things have made him late and he expresses that the absence of the parade may prove his early arrival in the court. The defence attorney agrees with the judge but the judge starts the discussion of his experience of the encountering to the parade. He says that a policeman stopped the people in the parade to let him go. He speaks in scattered sentences and fragmented views which show him as a person of the age who does not run after the order or the law of anything in the social structure.

The word 'stopped' shows two sides of the picture as, on the one hand, the parade or the policeman has stopped the performers to let him go, and, on the other hand, he has stopped the mind of the judge to reflect over the situation. The judge cannot think why the policeman is doing so as the latter does not know

about the judge. It means that the judge has his identity in the court and not outside of the court. This identity is the issue of the political structure that gives the status to the worker who is present at the work and not to the person who – though a part of the structure – is outside of his office. The judge wants to build his impression on the reader by saying that the policeman has no 'idea' about him. This abstract thing 'idea' presents the state of power of the judge who is nothing outside of his court.

He discusses that though the policeman does not know about him yet he stops the parade. He is called the 'weepy' and 'old fool' by the policeman. The word 'weepy' shows the state of every man's fate in the disordered life as everyone from the upper class to the lower leads a fragmented life and is always disturbed by one another. The judge is also called 'old fool' which means that he is a fool who finds out the law and justice in the life where there is no rule and no regulation but the estrangement and the celebration of the fragmented form of socio-political structure. The word 'call' suggests the limitation of the language as there is no clear idea but the word presents twofold meanings. Firstly, the judge is called a fool by the policeman due to his age or his hurry to go to his destination and secondly, he himself wants to be called a fool by the people in the courtroom because he seems unable to focus of the matters of the court as in the same way he may be unable to run his life smoothly with peace.

The defence attorney tries to present the alternative and at the same time, the prosecutor tries to have a continuance of the previous case. The two lawyers want to proceed the case but the judge keeps on talking about his pills and prescription. The judge starts talking about the religion of Shakespeare who is mentioned by the defendant and when the defence attorney starts his idea of peace, the judge asks him not to interrupt and tells about the power of a judge. This entire situation in the court shows the decentralization of it which is the institution of power and dominance but no more of justice as:

Judge: Is there a limit on my power? Pal? You don't want to know.  
Prosecutor: Your Honor, I have a family situation ...  
Judge: First time I have a mother and her kid. Dad didn't want to pay child support. The mother starts to cry. A more experienced man would have imposed some, some, what are they called ...?  
Bailiff: Judicial penalty.  
Judge: Hey, you should be doing this job. On the *guy*. I sent the kid to jail.  
Prosecutor: For what?  
Judge: I don't need a *reason*; all's I need's, this little *hammer* here ... N' I'm gonna use it till the batteries run out. [*He looks around.*] Where is it? All day I'm thinking: what can I do next? I'm *limited*, though, see, by, uh, by ...  
Defence Attorney: ... by the law (Mamet, 2005, p. 192)?



The judge here talks about his power on the seat and also puts forwards the current judicial system as in the fragmented form, it does not impart justice and no more the place of peace and harmony but it has become a place of personal prejudice of the judge who does whatever he wants to do. This idea has the appeal of the immediate aesthetic for the power of the judge on the one hand and for the art of the playwright on the other hand.

The judge uses broken dialogues while talking about the kid whom he has sent to the jail without its mistake. It shows that the situation has made the judge unable to speak correctly because he does not give justice to the parents of the kid and to the kid itself. The judge asks the bailiff that he should do this job of a judge. It means that the judge is tired of his job and is disturbed by the social structure so much that he is unable to think about the prevailing situation in the court. He says that he does not need for the reason to decide any case, what he needs is that little hammer. Here the 'hammer' represents the power and shows one holding the might is always right in every situation. This hammer presents the judge's ability through which he can resolve the case according to his own will power. He says that he uses that hammer until the batteries run out. This means that on the one hand the batteries are of the day and on the other hand these batteries are of his life as he holds the power till the day ends or till his death. In spite of so much power, he still says that he is limited by the law. It means that he wants to be above the law where he is free to come to the court and to do whatever he wants to do. The word 'limited' shows that he wants to hold limitless power or status in the court and also outside the court. He wants to be free from this limit as he is disturbed by inwardly which makes him limited and he wants peace of mind to live his life in a better way. He is limited because in the court he can do anything but outside the court, he has no particular identity and faces the problems of life in the same way as a layman because of the entropic environment in the socio-political spheres.

Then at the end of the play, the defence attorney reminds the judge that they can bring peace by going to the peace conference and he stands to go with them but before they take off, the conference has been quitted and the defendant laments for being too late to go to it. This treatment in the courtroom presents the unexceptional characters and reduction of an idea or abject to amplify the context of the text.

To cap up the whole discussion in this section, it can be said that the selected text present minimalist art in a postmodern context. The writer has used the techniques of minimalism throughout the text to impart a vast range of meanings. The minimalist slogan - less is more is ample through the interpretations of the selected text by David Mamet.

## **Conclusion**

The objective of this study has been to explore *Romance* by David Mamet in the light of Warren Motte's theoretical insight of minimalism to grasp the idea of

the former's use of literal as well as narrative techniques through the production of his characters in his theatre. Mamet presents unexceptional characters who exchange their fragmented ideas through random dialogues that present the prevailing socio-political American system. This study clarifies the narrative techniques of minimalism in the selected play so that it may enhance the scholarship on Mamet's art and theatre.

Mamet's language is simple as well as clear in his play *Romance* as the reader feels no confusion in understanding its text as well as the context. He can understand the politics of correlation between the characters in the play and the members in the American socio-political and religious systems. The characters – who represent the whole socio-political as well as religious structure – make use of weird discourse which makes them unexceptional individuals who represent disunity among the people of American society. The events in the background of the play such as peace conference and parade etc. present the idea of randomly chosen art to grasp the attention of the reader towards the major issues of anarchy, disharmony and identity crisis that fragment the socio-political, religious and particularly legal structures in America presented through the selected text. This study also recommends that the selected text can further be explored in the perspective of discourse analysis and language game to establish how and why the writer has made use of these constituents in the play. The future researcher's can also study *Romance* from the perspective of psychoanalysis.

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