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Representation of the American Dream in David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1982) and Kant's Views on Ethics and Morality: A Study

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Abstract:

The objective of this study is to study *Glengarry Glen Ross*, a 1982 play written by David Mamet bringing to the foreground the problems posed by the inherent opposition between the aspiration of achieving American Dream through big business and business ethics and morality. Human beings do not always follow the codes of ethics and morality in the chase after success. Mamet's businessmen in general and those in *Glengarry Glen Ross* in particular, are not free from this flaw. They see business as a means of achieving success, but facing their failure and frustration, they constantly try to survive the race for closing with clients and frequently use means, which are against business ethics and morality, to achieve success. Ethics or morality is considered as not only irrelevant to business, but as anti-business in spirit and intent. But, it is possible to have business ethics, because the two terms in spite of having apparent contradictions are not entirely opposite, instead they are related to each other. Business is primarily a human affair and man is a naturally moral being, so business needs to be ethical. In the play nothing ethical or moral happens twice in the two Acts. Business needs to be ethical from societal point of view also. Business ethics will create an ethical environment in business by increasing the desirable business conduct and behaviour and minimizing morally impermissible business practices. The inability to be or remain ethical in business, where resistance succumbs to the power of allurements of immoral business practices, will threaten the American Dream itself. According to Kantian morality, every action, every business decision, necessarily be such that the maxim on which it is based can be willed universally and coherently. Kant is well known for his principle of 'respect for persons'. In the play, this respect for person does not exist at all. But, a business firm is supposed to be a moral community. A major aspect of Kant's ethics is that it works as an effective moral critique of authoritarian hierarchical organizational structure. It helps in democratization of the workplace. Of course, Kantian model of business ethics is sometimes excessively demanding. But it is important to keep the immoral acts to minimum. At the end of the play they remain instances of frustrated followers of the American Dream. Business brings them neither economic prosperity nor moral betterment. Severing morality from business as a

tool of achieving success poses increasing problems for them by creating a spiritual vacuity in the persons.

Keywords: American Dream, business ethics, Kant's philosophy, principle of 'respect for persons'

The idea of the 'American Dream' has shaped the history of the American nation. It is a spirit of freedom often identified to be found in the United States which contains an assurance of development and success. It has tempted people from all nations to migrate to the country. In the words of James Truslow Adams, a historian, the American Dream is the "... dream of a land in which life should be better and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (27). The Dream has other aspects apart from material success. It includes attainment of the highest development as individuals and recognition from others without being discriminated on any ground. The Great Depression of 1929 revealed the vulnerability of the dream of success in America. It was felt that capitalism was not the sole way to success. But, the success dream in America did not completely lose its relevance even after the Great Depression. Although the Dream has variations and it has changed over the centuries, quest for wealth has remained a constant component. American Dream is exclusive in nature. Everyone cannot achieve it. In *Glengarry Glen Ross*, an all-male play written by David Mamet in 1982, the businessmen try to achieve success by any means. Ethics and morality has no place in their business; they sell bad plots of land to customers for remaining in the list of top salesmen, so that they may win the Cadillac, a symbol of the Dream in the play. Mamet shows us the gloomy side of the American Dream here. But the question of ethics and morality cannot be evaded in business also. According to Immanuel Kant's philosophical theories such as 'respect for persons,' one's actions must always be ethical and moral. Business cannot be an exception.

The objectives of this study are:

- To study the representation of the American Dream in *Glengarry Glen Ross*.
- To analyze the problems posed by the seemingly inherent opposition between the achievement of success through big business and business ethics and morality.

This is an analytical study where the text of Mamet's play is the primary source. Books, journals and encyclopedias etc. were consulted for a better understanding of the play and theories concerned. These secondary sources have been judiciously utilized in writing this article. Immanuel Kant's philosophy is of special importance in this study for understanding concepts like ethics and morality.

It has been assumed that David Mamet represents the dark side of the American Dream in this play. Although business and ethics seem to be opposite, they are not entirely so. Business ethics are necessary for society and for Kant ethics and morality are inseparable.

Mamet's businessmen in general and those in *Glengarry Glen Ross* in particular do not always follow the codes of ethics and morality in the chase after success. They see business as a means of achieving success, but facing their failure and frustration, they constantly try to survive the race for closing with clients and in order to achieve success they frequently use means, which are against business ethics and morality.

The area of business is often supposed to be a problem area, because it is difficult to apply ethical principles there. In fact, there seems to be an apparent opposition between ethics and business. Therefore, many people think that there is a self-contradiction in the term ‘business ethics’ – a tendency to believe that business and ethics cannot go together. It is usually thought that the goal of business is to make profit, “and people who work for business organizations must concern themselves with producing goods and services at a profit and to maximize the owner value. Ethics or morality is considered as not only irrelevant to business, but as anti-business in spirit and intent” (Mohapatra 137).

Business ethics is thought as a special set of rules and regulations exclusively for business matters. Much of what is known as business ethics is related neither to business nor to ethics. Business ethics, thus, is not as simple as it apparently looks. Can there be something called business ethics if the term is self-contradictory? The answer to this question can be given positively. It is possible to have business ethics, because (we will see in this discussion that) the two terms in spite of having apparent contradictions are not entirely opposite; instead, they are related to each other.

We may again ask why business should be ethical if business and ethics are opposite to each other. The reply is that business is primarily a human affair and man is a naturally moral being. It can be argued that “if man is a spiritual being as much as he is a rational being, his rationality and spirituality together imply morality as a necessary human faculty” (Mohapatra 137). Here, ethics and morality are treated alike, because, for Kant, an action cannot be ethical if it is not moral.

Human beings are gifted with freedom of choice. And therefore one is held responsible for what he/she does. How far is this true? Do the characters of Mamet’s play under study have this freedom? The answer is sadly negative. The characters’ endeavour to cheat their clients and fellow businessmen is a strategy in their desperate struggle to survive. Their frustration has attained such a state that any question of ethics and morality is of little importance to them. But, ethical issues in this case are not irrelevant. To be moral is not simply a feature of man; it is a necessity. So, if business is a human activity, it needs to be moral. Almost all activities of human beings are ethical; at least it is desirable that all activities of human beings should be guided by ethics. But, the business world depicted in Mamet’s play is an exception to this. The play is divided into two Acts. In Act One, the three scenes of which take place in a Chinese restaurant, we see Shelly Levene, a salesman in his fifties trying to get some good leads from Williamson. Being unable to fulfill Williamson’s demand for money, he fails to do so. Moss, on the other hand, tells Aaronow that they need to steal the Glengarry leads, which he declines. Moss intimidates him. Roma, in the third scene, strikes at the softest part of Ling, a client, by saying that he has done nothing adventurous in life till now. No ethical business takes place in the first Act.

In the second Act, the burglary is discovered and Levene is detected as the thief, who worked as an associate to Dave Moss. Roma, who proposed to work as a team with Levene a moment ago, finally pays Williamson for the rewarding Glengarry leads and persuades Williamson to give Levene the worst leads brining about the completion to his doom. Thus, at the end of the play, the reader finds that nothing ethical or moral happens twice in the two Acts.

Business needs to be ethical from societal point of view also. Business operates in society and benefits from the social structure, and it should reciprocate with responsibilities towards the society. No business can evade the question of responsibility to “the people and their environs who/ which are affected directly or indirectly” (Mohapatra 139). Since business functions in society, any business is affected by society and vice-versa. Business has the power to change societies (or it is believed to be so) and any immoral practice in business will have an adverse effect on it. Corrupt business practices will ultimately lead to a corrupt society. This is against the American Dream. No one wants to live in a corrupt society; every individual wants to live a better and fuller life and only a moral and ethical society can provide the required atmosphere for such fullest possible development of individual faculties.

Success through business does not simply mean that a business person will have huge success initially and gradually his/her prosperity will decline. Success in business cannot be a short term affair when it is looked as a means to fulfill the American Dream. It should aim at success for the maximum profit and longest possible term without being unethical. Business should be ethical in its own best interest. It will lead to maximization of long term owner value.

Business ethics is a type of applied ethics. Applied ethics can help in making a desirable world by increasing the number of ethically desirable entities and minimizing the ethically undesirable ones. Business ethics will create an ethical environment in business by increasing the desirable business conduct and behaviour and minimizing morally impermissible business practices.

The inability to be or remain ethical in business, where resistance succumbs to the power of allurements of immoral business practices, will threaten the American Dream itself. It will make a person worse as an individual, which is against the myth. It is called as a myth here because the American Dream was never unbiased and for all, in spite of popular belief. It was not purely ethical either. The Dream was initially for the white people and to be more specific for the white males. The dream is also exclusive and one's success comes at the cost of others. One does not rise in life with others; one rises from others.

Elaine Sternberg emphasizes on two main principles of ethical business conduct, which tries to strike a balance between the commercial concern and social concern (Sternberg 7). She calls these principles distributive justice and ordinary decency. Distributive justice means that the benefits and rewards of business should be distributed in proportion to the contributions made to the organizational goals. But this does not happen in capitalism. American society depicted in Mamet's play, being a capitalist one, cannot provide this just atmosphere for all to prosper equally. Ordinary decency is the trust necessary for a long term view of the business and its survival over time. None of these have been achieved in case of Mamet's businessmen. They live for today and strive for today. Their future is bleak and they have no plan to gain long term benefit. Going against all questions of business ethics they sell plots of land which are so inferior that they are practically impossible to be sold. Without the doctrines of distributive justice and ordinary decency, maximizing long term owner value would be impossible and the very purpose of business would be defeated. According to these principles, good ethics is good business. Profits, in business, are to be generated within the bounds of morality and without deception and fraud. Deceitful maximization of profits is neither proper business nor is good for the very purpose of business, which is to maximize long term owner value.

According to Kantian morality, every action, every business decision, necessarily be such that the maxim on which it is based can be willed universally and coherently. It is important not to have any self-contradiction for the maxim to be applied consistently. Principles, which cannot be willed universally and coherently, will make the actions based on them morally forbidden both in business and in other spheres of life.

Kant is well known for his principle of 'respect for persons'. Christine Korsgaard says, "Physical coercion treats someone's person as a tool, and lying treats someone's reason as a tool" (140-41). For Kant forcing a person to do what he does not want is the worst disrespect to his humanity. But, making him do such a work deceitfully is a total misuse of his reasoning power along with disrespect to his humanity. Everyone should avoid coercive and deceitful behaviour towards others. Respecting a person as an end requires that he should have freedom to develop his rational and moral capacities. In the play when Roma sells Lingk a plot of "*Florida Bullshit*" (Mamet 51), this respect for person does not exist in the deal at all. Roma's intent is to sell it anyhow and exist in the competitive market as a successful sales person. He repeats the practical sales maxim "Always be closing ..." quoted at the beginning of the play (Mamet 72). In Act Two of the play when Lingk enters the real estate office to cancel the deal with Roma, he is not interested to talk at all. Legally they have three business days time for doing so, but Roma wants to somehow evade Lingk's questions so that he doesn't come to know that the cheque was cashed, which means that their deal was complete. Lingk comes to know that his cheque was cashed only later in the play when he sees police investigating on the robbery at the office. Williamson suddenly says, "Mr. Lingk. James Lingk. Your contract went out. Nothing to ..." (Mamet 95). Roma is furious and scolds Williamson violently:

"You stupid fucking cunt. *You* Williamson ... I'm talking to *you*, shit-head ... You just cost me *six thousand dollars*. (Pause) Six thousand dollars. And one Cadillac. That's right. What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it, asshole. You fucking *shit*. Where did you learn your *trade*. You stupid fucking *cunt*. You *idiot*. Whoever told you you could work with *men*?" (Mamet 95-96).

Men in their business share some common attributes. These may vary from lying and engaging oneself in immoral acts to win the client's mind to robbing one's own office. It is not that Williamson revealed the truth knowingly, but he made a mistake by telling the truth. There is no place for truth in their concept of business. Levene, another salesman, is also angry at him:

WILLIAMSON. What are you trying to tell me?

LEVENE. What Roma's trying to tell you. What I told you yesterday. Why you don't belong to this business. (Mamet 97)

But, a business firm is supposed to be a moral community. A major aspect of Kant's ethics is that it works as an effective moral critique of authoritarian hierarchical organizational structure. It helps in democratization of the workplace. The real estate firm in *Glengarry Glen Ross* is not democratic. Williamson, who is thought to be ineffective by salesmen of his office, is the boss to whom others have to look for a decision regarding who is going to have the best or the worst of the leads.

Kantian model of business ethics is sometimes excessively demanding. His 'respect for person' principle and purity of motive as condition of truly moral actions may make it difficult to apply this model to solve real life problems. It is often said that one cannot earn profit in business without doing some acts of immorality. But it is important to keep the immoral acts to minimum.

Violation of a moral principle under demanding circumstances may sometimes be justified on the basis of the very purpose of morality. The businessmen in Mamet's plays consistently break moral principles; but their acts of doing so cannot be justified. Personal interests prevail over societal ones, in fact these acts of violation of morality are stretched so far that there is no societal end at all. Business brings them neither economic prosperity nor moral betterment. At the end of the play they remain instances of frustrated followers of the American Dream. Severing morality from business as a tool of achieving success poses increasing problems for them by creating a spiritual vacuity in the persons.

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