Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

As it has been stated earlier, Mamet has always acknowledged his debt to the turn-of-the-century Chicago sociologist and economist Thornstein Veblen for providing him the moral vision that enabled him to interpret the actions and character of the men that people his plays. The playwright was ostensibly preoccupied by the malaise that afflicted the capitalistic and business-oriented fast-paced society and trying to project them with a view to eviscerating the horrifying situation that has developed in a money abounding nation. He showed how petty and sleazy men evoke pious maxims to justify morally culpable ends for selfish and wrong goals. Veblen has possibly taught Mamet to remain at a distance from politics as a playwright, and to study the nature of the urban situation in the light of his theories, although he has responded to many political issues vocally. The situations of Mamet’s plays were those that evaded a political solution that could not be alleviated by a political transformation or a revolution at large. Hence many critics labelled him a pessimist and an apolitical dramatist.

Mamet has proved successful in throwing light into the heart of American spiritual distress and dissolution with the help Veblen’s ideas. Mamet’s characters and situations were accorded by Veblen’s interpretations about the ‘predatory face of life’ of the Leisure Class sanctioning violence physical and verbal and as approving a totally liberal and licensed life. Thus ‘free enterprise’ to Teach in American Buffalo meant
absolute freedom to engage in any kind of activity that seemed fit for an individual by even compromising morality. Mamet’s characters are essentially Veblen’s ‘delinquents’ who believe that in business greed is acceptable, and the exploiter can be free of guilt and self-control. In fact Mamet’s works authenticate the key ideas of his master who provided him with much insights of the dehumanised society and values of America.

If Mamet had distrusted political affirmations Sam Shepard also fostered such a sociological stance. He had never kept faith in overt political activities and hence was easily drawn to the ideas propounded by the Russian philosopher and spiritual leader Gurdjieff. Shepard always liked to play a cowboy, inwardly and outwardly, enjoying the liberties authorized by the frontier myth of self-reliance, independence, individualism and that male-machismo. He had changed his name, setting himself free from the shackles of his parentage, by shedding the family name ‘Rogers.’ He seldom regretted to have adopted the name ‘Shepard’ which reminds Americans of the name of a murderer who killed his wife. Family and parents had always been a kind of bondage for Shepard and fleeing to New York and working as a rock n’ roll star and later a dramatist in the new name that gave him a sense of immense freedom and ecstasy hitherto unknown. But then he had been negating his true self, the essence of his true being, his roots. Gradually, as a sense of loss began to overcome him like it does to any drifter, the playwright began an honest quest for the self, unable to define himself in the context of the demoralised urban life that he found disgusting and un-appeasing to the spirit. By then he had enjoyed life to its full, resorting to every undesirable activity such as taking drugs and visiting every unlawful haunt. A detailed account of Sam Shepard’s evolution
as a playwright contributed by disoriented youthful life experiences is given in Chapter 1 along with a similar account of David Mamet’s growth as a vehement social critic augmented by a disconcerted family and exasperating boyhood.

Shepard came into close association with Lord Pentland, a Gurdjieff follower in the States and began to get enlightened about a novel way of achieving meaningful life. It was the teachings of Gurdjieff that gave him a deep understanding of the importance of character and discipline in playwriting. Improvisational techniques gave way to conscious efforts of monitoring the course of action and plot. Shepard’s fluid and ‘flat’ characters thereafter became profound cases for psychological study. His own yearning for a fixed identity became the reigning metaphor of his plays. As a Gurdjieff follower he shunned public life and turned to his soul inwards engaging in theatrical and other creative activities, as tireless activity to discover one’s own essence forms the vital message of Gurdjieff’s teachings.

As a socially sensitive playwright Shepard’s search for identity may be likened to Mamet’s projection of the identity crisis in his plays also. Both playwrights thus give prime importance to the projection of the self as lacking the desired qualities for achieving the ultimate end of human welfare. External forces plied would only prove fruitless. Only a transformation of the self, a spiritual reawakening of the individual, only the individual’s regenerated self can work out a change in the society: by espousing a selfless pursuit of tireless services to the society can one accomplish the liberation of the society in particular and the world in general, they imply in the plot and action of the plays that are essentially poems of loss. An analysis in this respect studying and
comparing Sam Shepard's influence by Gurdjieff in the early plays and in an advanced mode in Buried Child, A Lie of the Mind and Simpatico and David Mamet's influence by Veblen as seen in the three plays, especially Buffalo and Glengarry, is carried out in Chapter 2.

Sam Shepard and David Mamet are two among those playwrights who have come to prominence during the sixties and seventies. They have no claim of being the flag bearers of a particular movement other than that they share certain common formative experiences. They ripened out of the Sixties, which saw many social upheavals, which inadvertently led to the breaking of certain set traditions of theatre. Contrary to the beliefs of the avant-garde theatre they predominated the theatre that marked the centrality of language and the playwright. Shepard's early plays were distinguished by his visual imageries and the driving energy of his speeches particularly his long soliloquies. Hyperactive adolescent boys, jazz musicians, pop artists cowboys of the west, cultural heroes etc peopled his exhilarating plays. His splendid adroitness in blending images of the American West, pop motifs, science fiction, and other elements of popular and youth culture was unique. But in the late seventies, Shepard's unconventional dramatic vision gave way to a more conventional dramatic form, the family tragedy. He had successfully tried a hand at acting, winning critical accolades for his appearances in films as Days of Heaven (1978), Resurrection (1980), The Right Stuff (1983), and Fool for Love (1985), the last one written by him based on his own play of the same name.
Although there may be fundamental differences in approaches between Shepard and Mamet, both share common concerns that are typical for modern American playwrights. Their works are provocative in the sense they represent a life so disoriented, destabilized or fragmented that any modern American passes through. They shock the audience out of their complacency to empathize with the characters that undergo that existential angst, an essential feature of his inexplicable circumstance evolved due to the pursuit of materialistic philosophy. Both followed the examples set by Beckett, Pinter, Albee and others in creating protagonists incapable of rescuing themselves from the imprisonment, spatial as well as temporal, in claustrophobic spaces. They try to fill the void of their lives with a wide range of activities depending on the milieu they live in. Such a kind of influence from forefathers has led to the playwrights' acceptance of a kind of form and technique both inherited and indigenous, a detailed study of which is also made in Chapter 2. Thus women become insignificant and get victimised like Ruthie, an off-stage character in Buffalo, Karen in Plow, Halie in Buried Child, and Beth in A Lie. And violence is staged with courtesy to Greek tragedies, which form part of the techniques accepted by modern plays. Mamet's characters on the one hand are engaged in commitments and desires in de-mythized forms; commodity fetishism, sexual negotiations and exploitations, aborted or botched crimes, brutal physical assaults, fraudulent business transactions enacted by petty thieves masquerading as businessmen are only some of the obsessions in their world of activity. Shepard's fractured victims on the stage such as cowboys, pop artists, jazz musicians and the like substitute lives
meaningful activities with **games**, **confrontations** and **blocks of rhythmic imagistic language.**

Negative traits such as swindle or deception, distrust, dejection, intrigue, verbal and physical violence, compromised ethics in business and personal relationships, abrogated principles within and without intimate circles, are highlighted in the characters in their course of accomplishing selfish business and materialistic ends. An interpretative study towards this made in Chapter 3 reveals such stark truths in this regard. An in-depth study of *American Buffalo* made in the light of compromised business ethics in a family-like strictly male group has enabled to disclose the corruption and decay at the very basis of American business. The distrust and antipathy towards friends alias associates that substitute swindle for business, is brought to the fore when viewed in the realm of contacts occurring outside the domestic situation just as it happens in Shepard's *Simpatico*. Don, Bob and Teach co-habit in a misogynistic atmosphere as they propound the theory that females are outside the purview of understandable business. The hatred or contempt for women is also found to be as a result of the men's state of impotence as part of their incompetence to work out a balanced ethics of life. This happens in the men who shun women and employ crude schemes against one another as illustrated in the study of the play *Simpatico* too.

*Glengarry* has a more bizarre story to tell about the deep-rooted corruption and decay that have infiltrated American business as such. Real-estate salesmen engaged in a shark and mouse game victimise others and thereby themselves by selling worthless tracts of land by fraudulence and wily craft. Business itself becomes a metaphor for the
American lust for money, which can be gained at any cost, sacrificing those frontier values of hard work and self-reliance. Exploitation of others—though be it their capitalistic bosses, equals or inept clients—is their motto, so much so that they realise the ultimate sales maxim, “always be closing.” Towards this any kind of coercion, corporal, mental or verbal is legitimatised for monetary or materialistic benefits as it is analysed in the critique on Glengarry.

The malaise that has eaten into the corpus of the American film industry is disemboweled in the story of the two alter egos, Bobby Gould and Charlie Fox and the tests of faith and loyalty they pass through. The play does not end without an apparent re-affirmation of their friendship although travails of deception and distrust mar their relationship for a brief period. They are relieved in the end with prospects of money and glitter in the tinsel town achieved by producing and screening a new film. It appears that Mamet’s characters as such suffer from the fear of downfall and the fear of being trampled upon but hope to escape the fear by amassing wealth and position by any means.

But Sam Shepard’s plays often focus on the uncanny events and strange feelings in commonplace settings. He, as a person becomes familiar to his audience only through his movie-star persona. Therefore the dream-like yet domestic settings in Buried Child and A Lie of the Mind disclose the tensions incorporated in the feelings of alienation and isolation that play havoc on the deranged and fragmented souls of the protagonists stranded on the stage. The violent and isolated spirits are tormented primarily due to the acts of guilt they were forced into in the past in Buried Child and that in turn occurred
when the farmhouse was spilling over with crops and when there was abundance and prosperity. Material prosperity has ill-directed their sense of the morality and propriety, it is presumed as it happened to America at large, a nation that is immersed in carnal pleasures and the resultant violence and confusion. It is a similar theme of sexual jealousy and violence that leads to the anguish of those estranged men and women in A Lie of the Mind that has been explicated in the section devoted to the analysis of the play in this light. Shepard evinces such elemental traits that have led to the undermining of American moral culture. Men resorting to violence and women being subjugated and deserted lead us to the idea that a peaceful relationship between these “two opposite animals” (Lie, 103) is “terrible and impossible;” as Shepard himself has said in an interview based on his own life experience (Shewey 224). The author of this dissertation has published a research article, “Estranged Men and Subjugated Women in Sam Shepard’s A Lie of the Mind” assimilating the predominant ideas in this respect.

Deception and intrigue reigns the milieu of horseracing in Simpatico for the achievement of a worthy position. wealth and impeccable identity. Nevertheless this proves almost unattainable and impossible in the once prosperous and bountiful land of horseracing. It is such a representative yearning that Cecilia reveals as she craves to be back at the Derby to see the invincible horses perform their best races. But the past seems irrevocable and the tall dreams fail as it does to Carter, as things do not work as he planned.

With respect to language both dramatists have retained an essential authenticity in their use of speech and dialogue. Shepard’s spontaneous style that reflects the fre
cowboy spirit of the author is contrasted by Mamet’s terse style of a philologist, a brand of rapid-fire, cross-purpose dialogue as that comes out of a machine gun. David Mamet’s language differs in the sense that it does not convey the kind of poetry that Shepard offers. His bold, funny and authentic style entertains a hilarious audience only to instill in them the nuances of the predicament of modern man. Such aspects of David Mamet’s use of language and Sam Shepard’s symbolic style have been detailed in Chapter 4. It has been found that in offering a scathing criticism of the contemporary disquietude and demythized state of affairs in America both the playwrights have embraced a post-modern form within which they have followed the traditional realistic or naturalistic methods also. Whatever outward structure they adopted does not hold off their ultimate end of sarcastic and biting criticism. In doing so they have espoused methods of eviscerating the negative and detrimental traits of the worn out and destabilised culture of the modern materialistic urban milieu. One important method is definitely their use of language and style whose study along with an in-depth analysis of the images and symbols used, as exemplified and analysed in Chapter 4. Although they offer slightly different kinds of poetic speech, undoubtedly the bombast and sound reminds the audience of the language of utter meaningless existence. Thus when Mamet plays out the frustration and desperation of the protagonist in full masculine fury, Shepard renders an emotive speech ridden with images and symbols.

Nevertheless both have clung to verisimilitude and plausibility in the patterns of speech and style of discourse. Hardly rejecting the old theatrical “realism” and representationalism like their continental counterparts they chose to preserve the spoken
dramatic and linguistic norms of conventional theatre. Even for the most surreal ends they have not fully forsaken the tradition. The language in their plays essentially embodies the chaos and nihilism of contemporary existence, its banality and almost inherent sense of negation. For the neo-realist playwright language no longer need communicate literal meaning. The basis of message is transmitted not strictly literally but by their rhythm, tone and impact of speech that conveys a deeper meaning, either as a subtext or a statement about life and world being depicted. Teach’s definition of ‘free enterprise’ (Buffalo), Roma’s speech of ensnaring Lingk (Glengarry), Gould and Fox’s dialogue on money-making (Plow), Vince’s speech of his seeing the faces of ancestors on the windshield (Buried Child), Beth’s half-witted speeches during brain damage (A Lie), and Vinnie’s speech about his reawakening (Simpatico) are only some of this sort. Within the confines and pacing of the language forms of the past masters, their language keeps swirling about just as their plots.

The concern of both the playwrights rests with the more or less open-ended investigation of tangled emotional experiences. Shepard’s reliance on the personal has a particular socio-political end although not explicitly shown. Shepard and Mamet belong to a generation of playwrights who believed that a play should seldom resort to teach or instruct its audience ideas of a morally and practically feasible life. This may not be considered as shirking away from the responsibility of sociologically aware playwrights but simply because of the profound suspicion of becoming authoritative voices in the society. Instead they have chosen to bear upon themselves the task of offering corrosive critiques of the various popular mythologies, through intense personal experiences. That
the two playwrights are included in the American Canonical playwrights after the great ancestors like Eugene O'Neill. Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee is itself a hallmark of their greatness in writing plays. It is true that the two dramatists ostensibly share a number of common thematic connections with those of their illustrious “forefathers”: the sense of loss owing to the receding frontier ethics, the subversion of the American Dream, the pressures of urbanisation, and the denial of the past. Other than these, Shepard, in particular is likened to the great canon for his intuitive rendition of the disharmony in the family dynamics as O’Neill did in his oeuvres. Mamet is not a lesser genius as he has also boldly ventured into the field in his unique masculine and energetic way of rendering a biting criticism of the contemporary bewilderment and societal anarchies. Yet another aspect that paved their way to being marked in the group of canonised writers is their distinctively experimental streak they all share.

To conclude, both the great playwrights of America are preoccupied with offering scathing criticisms and explicit warnings on the repercussions of the evils practised by a morally and spiritually deprecated society although projected in slightly different modes of expressions. Shepard is more an experimentalist than a conventionalist, even in following set traditions he has adhered to a novel way of marking his identity in his methods. Mamet is a corrosive critic in the way he shocks the audience who are engrossed in their dreams far removed from reality. The two-mar. dialogue of conventional drama seems to be his favourite mode of playwriting. The ultimate ends underlying the moral purposes of these two social critics seem to be the same, arousing a slumbering humanity and educating them of the untoward-ness of a technologically
surfeit society failing to employ precautionary measures to stop the apocalypse which is soon to set in and just around the corner in the prestigious country of America.