

**Jewish Diaspora in David Mamet’s play “The Old Neighbourhood”**

**R. Sellaraj Manuneethi,**

**Assistant Professor of English,**

**Pope’s College,**

**Sawyerpuram. 628251**

**Abstract**

A Diaspora is the movement, migration or scattering of people away from an established or ancestral homeland. The story of Jewish Diaspora begins in the year 589 B.C when the kingdom of Judea was conquered by the Babylonians. Ever since, significant numbers of Jews have lived in Diaspora many expressing longing to return to the land of Israel.

David Mamet was born in 1947 in Chicago to Jewish parents. His family life, like that of many other immigrants was built on denial of the past. Acculturation, assimilation was the agreed price for becoming American and in the process much was lost. Mamet feels that in America, Jews are still, in some sense, strangers in a strange land. They still thought of themselves as Jews. There was Jewish community. They implied a separateness that had always been the essence of Jewish claim and the Jewish suffering. They looked for some basis on which they could move into the mainstream. Mamet has accused himself of doing much the same. He says, ‘The Jewish child ...is torn between the desire to belong to the dominant culture and the desire to remain true to his or her heritage, religious observance and cultural identity.

Mamet in his play **‘The Old Neighbourhood’** offers a reflection of that process. This paper deals with how Mamet brings out this process through his characters.

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David Mamet was born in 1947 in Chicago to Jewish parents. His grandparents on his mother's side arrived in America before the First World War; on his father's side, in 1921. His mother's family derived from Warsaw, his father's from Hrubieszow, a village on the Bugg River near the Russian-Polish border. They were Ashkenazi Jews (Jewish person with a middle or northern European background). His grandparents brought nothing with them from the shtetl. His paternal grandfather left his wife, Calara, who therefore had to bring the family up as a single parent, in retrospect, it seems, foreshadowing a series of broken marriages which would include Mamet's own first venture. His family life, like that of many other immigrants was built on denial of the past.

Mamet feels that in America, Jews are still, in some sense, strangers in a strange land. They still thought of themselves as Jews. There was Jewish community. They shared Jewish food, "the comforting codes, language, jokes, and attitudes which make up the consolations of strangers in a strange land" (Kane, Leslie). They implied a separateness that had always been the essence of Jewish claim and the Jewish suffering. This generation staked its claim on America by seeking some basis on which they could move into the mainstream by modifying, omitting, suppressing, and acting. They did not deny who they were but looked for ways in which difference could be de-emphasised, subtly adjusting themselves as though

walking into the face of the wind. They looked for some basis on which they could move into the mainstream. Mamet has accused himself of doing much the same. He says,

“The Jewish child ...is torn between the desire to belong to the dominant culture and the desire to remain true to his or her heritage, religious observance and cultural identity.”

(Mamet, David)

Mamet in his play **'The Old Neighbourhood'** offers a reflection of that process. This play suggests potential barriers that individuals must face when they return to the place where they came to know community. **The Old Neighbourhood** consists of three plays held together somewhat loosely by the middle-aged character, Bobby Gould. In these three episodes, Bobby attempts to reconnect with his ethnic past and personal identity by returning to his old Jewish neighbourhood of Chicago's South Shore. In the frequently insipid yet strangely poignant dialogue between Bobby and his old friend Joey, we begin to see how the wistful memories of a particular location can bring to the surface a cultural memory that has long since disappeared. **The Old Neighbourhood** calls attention to individual accounts of a more comprehensive, less visible ethnic identity implicit within these narratives.

Mamet's renewed interest in Judaism, informed further by his own childhood memories, is introduced explicitly at the beginning of the first part, **The Disappearance of the Jews**. This first play has been called “pearl” of the entire trilogy for its subtle rendering of boyhood memories, as two old friends try to separate their idealized accounts of the past from the disenchanted reality that such ideals inevitably produce. Here, Bobby refers to this recent separation from his gentile wife. Characters reach out only to find connections to a past that never existed: “Because everything is so far from us today. And we have no connection.” (33)

As second generation Chicago Jews, Bobby and Joey struggle continually to retain cultural identity as they become more and more assimilated into a world beyond the old neighbourhood. Bobby's failure to connect with the individuals and distinct memories of his childhood becomes increasingly apparent as we move into the play's second and third acts.

The second play is entitled Jolly, a neurotic and bitter woman who has clearly retained all the anger that she felt growing up. Jolly's perpetual, self-appeasing reliving of her painful childhood is sustained to an even greater extent by the repetitive, often vacuous exchanges between brother and sister. Jolly explains cynically to Bobby that their hypocritical father is "learning – you're going to love this; He's learning to live 'facing the past'":

Bob: Facing his past

Jolly: Facing his past

Bob: Well, of course. Of course. That's how they all live. Facing the past. Facing the past. Looking at the past. Fuck him. AND fuck "counselling" is the thing I'm saying. (51)

The word 'past' appears six times in this short exchange, reminding us of Bobby's own effort to return to his past even as he supports his sister, repeating her opinions back to her and saying quiet as she continues to repeat herself. This repetition is especially effective since Jolly is incapable of perceiving her present situation without referring to pain caused by her insensitive, selfish parents. Jolly's inability to exist in a present uncontaminated by the pain of the past is emphasized further in her marriage to Carl. Jolly marries Carl to show her

parents that a good man could, in fact, love her. Similarly, her relationship with Bobby is built heavily on his having seen what “they” did to her all those years. This isolation of an unnamed yet overpowering “they” will return in the opening and close of the final part of **The Old Neighbourhood.**

In the third play, “Deeny”, Bobby meets up with his old high-school girl friend. As Deeny talks incessantly and somewhat incoherently, Bobby hardly speaks. Incidentally, the speech attributions switch from “Bobby” in the first play to plain old “Bob” in the final two. This minor change seems also to reflect the marked shift in tone from the nostalgic recreation of the first act to the dawning detachment and disenchantment of the later acts. Throughout this final part, Deeny is half-present, musing over such disparate themes as a garden she will probably never cultivate, those “stupid molecules” that scientists are trying to make smaller, and even more vaguely, the lingering pangs of regret. It often feels as though Deeny were giving a series of isolated monologues with occasional and brief references to Bobby’s presence in the room. It is this unspecified distance between Deeny and Bobby, however, that gives a lasting effect to what may seem mere chatter; it emphasizes a longing to connect with something or someone, a desire left unfulfilled, ending as abruptly as it does despondently.

Throughout the third part, Deeny is unable to sustain her interest in practical matters of the present for long before lapsing into such pseudo-philosophical matters as the difference between longing and acquiring, love and mere convenience. In the opening lines of this final play, Deeny muses on having a garden of her own. She could watch her garden grow while drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes, two activities that, according to Deeny, help to “paralyze” and to “cut down” one’s ability to “use the world”. She wants to create, to “force”

or “bring out” the life of her imaginary garden, but she cannot ,beyond the thoughts and words of desire to produce such life.

Near the end of the third play, Deeny lapses into more disjointed ruminations that emphasize the aloofness she feels in her present life. She has difficulty even talking about her work, her home, arguing that it is only significant to her. Such assumptions further complicate her longing for connection and affirmation, though she is far less likely to request Bobby’s support than Jolly is in the previous act. The impossibility of community that Deeny perceives is especially evident when she abruptly asks Bobby, in the midst of this detachment, “How is your life?” to which he replies, “As you see”.(96)Deeny’s unforeseen reflection on those “tribes that mutilate themselves” also highlights the space between individuals who share no “ceremony”, no “sorrow of years” that might “force” them to “surrender” themselves to a larger community, the tone of regret, “the old thing” that becomes a final transition back to the opening lines of what “they” have said about the frost. She again agrees with what “they” have said, though Deeny stipulates that she agrees “despite the fact that they say it” (99)

Deeny and Bobby continue drifting “back and forth”, wistful of the things they “could not have” and “the things (they’d) given up.” Bobby occasionally answers a question with a dull or cryptic fragment. Deeny talks of “stupid molecules” that keep getting even smaller, helping to reaffirm the futility of one’s search for finality. While she recognizes that she may never have anything but an imaginary garden, she sees it as “waiting, waiting, just beyond”.(94)Deeny’s depiction of growing up and growing old is both potentially hopeful and barren: the “we” of her musings are in a constant state of waiting for and “turning” away, perhaps from living itself. What was cherished in earlier years becomes worn and tiresome; passions are muted and grow cold from neglect. In the end, there is little left to say. Instead,

Deeny and Bobby go back to their opening dialogue, reiterating what “they say” about the impending frost as they exchange goodbyes. The “cold comfort” that something will ultimately replace the love and memories lost over time lingers after the play has ended. In these final lines abstractions and farewells, the imagined community of The Old Neighbourhood dissolves, leaving two characters strangely united through a shared commitment to move forward both aware that they can no longer go back.

It becomes evident that this play is about the disappointments of nostalgia and the various ways in which it often fails to connect explicitly with notions of the real. Bobby attempts to go back, to bridge the gaps between his memories and his present situation. During this final exchange with Deeny, Bobby may begin to see that his memories of the past cannot save him from facing his fears in the present. His memories have separated from him, moved on as he has, and many are no longer recognizable. It is clear that throughout his conversations with Joey, Jolly, and Deeny, Bobby is worried about his own situation at home. Returning to The Old Neighbourhood seems only to have convinced him of his lack of any solid roots in his present or his past.

### **Works Cited**

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