



CRITICAL REVIEW

# Political correctness on David Mamet's Oleanna

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**Abstract.** The present work examined the issues of political correctness embodied in language and practice of John and Carol. It also analyzed what the problem of political correctness itself depicted in Oleanna. Contention between John and Carol shows that the fall of politics of difference remained only deepened confrontation in American history. The result of their conflict is a bleak sociocultural wasteland; only violence can be preserved. Both rigid political languages categorizing people and total individualization without concerning socioeconomic context composing political agency is dangerous. Where the place for compromising is founded, real communication can occur. By unraveling political correctness, we could reinterpret the cultural specificity of America and its significance still existing today.

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## INTRODUCTION

Accompanied with the emergence of radicalism in 1960s and 70s, political correctness was prevalent sociopolitical movement in the United States (Reinelt, 2011). Feminist, queer, and other minority group tried to establish social atmosphere to prohibit offensive language having possibilities to lead hate crime, prejudices, and discrimination against minorities. Universities, where most progressive discourses were shared, broadly accepted the idea of political correctness. The specificity of university as academic ground sanctioned people to experiment this progressive idea throughout student activism. Student activists started campaigns hindering language and practice relating to racism, sexism, and homophobia on campus. Consequently, university language protocol was enacted (Hwang, 2000). The enactment of protocol brought ambivalent reactions. A group endorsing subversive power of political correctness asserted the movement successively had intervening deep-seated hierarchy of university. Opposing group denounced political correctness for violating freedom of speech and thoughts, which was supposed to be secured in university (Hwang, 2000).

In fact, political correctness was gradually losing its significance as time went by as any other political movements did. Reagan and Bush administration

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reconstructed their conservative agenda relied on neo-liberalistic ideologies. Right-wing presses and intellectuals denounced political correctness for having similarities with fascism, censorship, and puritanism (Reinelt, 2011). Especially, they showed antipathy against dogmatic and coercive principles of political correctness. For freedom of speech is advocated as a primary rights by many Americans until now, the idea of nonoffensive language is perceived rather negatively. Because of controversies against it, the significance of political correctness is conceived differently.

Mamet's *Oleanna* was written when disputes over political correctness were active (Lee, 2011). Contemporary critics in 1990s inclined to analyze the play with provocative Clarence-Hill hearing. Anita Hill's allegation against judge candidate Thomas Clarence for sexual harassment caused analytic framework of *Oleanna* to being concentrated on the matter of gender politics (Mohammed, 2009). The climax of the play was perceived as "the result of propagandizing sexual harassment" of feminist (MacLeod, 1995). Carol was apprehended as a monstrous embodiment of radical feminist group that the age of ideology gave birth to. Feminist critics, on the contrary, indicated Carol's character for representing negative stereotype only operating to attack dominant male communities (Goggans, 1997). MacLeod (1995) who suggested the third interpretive way concerning with gender representation of the play, posed a question about too much attention to sexual harassment issue on *Oleanna*. By the time of 1990s, sexual aggravation was understood as a principal issue to analyze *Oleanna*. However, MacLeod (1995) indicated that public's focus on "threatened masculinity" contributed to distort the way to appreciate *Oleanna* properly. Regarding to MacLeod's (1995) perspective, pinpointing where power clash of Carol and John happens will help us to delve into multilayered problem of power dynamics in *Oleanna*. Since political correctness converges clashes and antagonism among different groups of diverse political stance, analyzing the locus where the matter of political correctness occurs will give a broader image to understand not only *Oleanna* itself but also historical context of the play. The present work will examine issues of political correctness embodied in language and practice of John and Carol. By unraveling the problem of political correctness, we could reinterpret cultural specificity of America and its significance still existing today.

#### **University: A Laboratory of Cultural Battle Field**

David Mamet's *Oleanna* starts with two quotations. A folk song *Oleanna*, inspired Mamet to title his play, demonstrates an ardent aspiration of Norwegian immigrants settled in Pennsylvania for establishing new utopian dreamland. Naïve Ole and his wife Anna were ignorant of capitalism system dominating the promising country. Shrewd businesses men sold useless wasteland to these innocent farmers. Consequently, the dream of establishing New Norwegian community was collapsed (Chiaromonte, 2014). Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* seems to imply author's intention to write *Oleanna* (Mohammed, 2009). Young men enjoying their vitality combines with the image of abandoned land of *Oleanna*. The reason for Mamet to choose university as the main setting of the play shows relations of these quotations. According to Morgenstern (2012) university was considered as protected institutional sphere where mainstream ideology could not intervene. Mamet's *Oleanna*,

however, do not follow general myth toward university and its pedagogical function. At the first introduction of main characters, John, just announced to get a tenureship in university, talks through his phone sharing opinions about his new house. Another protagonist, Carol, starts to speak only after John ends his dragging conversation with unknown counterpart who does not exist on the stage. This description of teacher and student relationship shows a slice of real problem, which is the crisis in university (Morgenstern, 2012).

The stark contrast of teacher and student does not solely reflecting the reality of university and the collapse of higher education. Throughout centuries, America gradually lost its idealistic state model operating a consensus of citizens. Regardless of where they were born or their religion, citizens of the United States believed they were guaranteed equal opportunities. In fact, citizens who could attain real priorities as citizens were mostly White Anglo-Saxon Protestants (WASP) maintaining value system of their predecessors. *Oleanna* shows an episodic facet of paradox in the United States. John, who has power in system of university, is the representation of WASP in the play. From the beginning he tries to exert his economic power becoming as one of teacher having tenure. He merely presumes Carol's visit is aiming for posing objection about her grade, which made John somewhat disregard Carol's existence in his office. On the other hand, Carol, a student who visits John's office, starts to divulge ambivalent aspects of myth toward university and American society. She is a discouraged student of John who constantly fails to understand not only the language of John but also method to become a successful student in his class. Her presence shows the fate that WASP should inevitably confront with.

After the era of civil rights movement, discourses dealing with backlash of sustaining crisis of American identity occurred. Despite its purpose of enhancing freedom of speech and thoughts, university was the place where hierarchical structure was sustained by division between students and teachers. Teachers can be secured by institutional rules and practices on campus under the name of tenureship. The two categories of constituent parts of university straightforwardly visualize clashes among various groups in American society. Mohammed (2009) gives a valuable observation that *Oleanna*. University works as allegorical setting of American society where collision of different sociopolitical groups is generated. Even though university sustained division of teachers and students, the place was protected against vilification of conservative discourses utilized as a social laboratory where subverting social ideas and its result could be preserved. The end of Carol and John's relationship is then, depicts result of American society had to face. In short, the setting of the play delivers two failure of American society: inequity of hierarchical structure of society which was supposed to give freedom of thought and speech to every constituents and the result of experiment in the academic laboratory where the idea of political correctness itself fails within.

Although controversy over freedom of speech still exists, supporting the idea of political correctness served to deconstruct hierarchical power structure of society. By the end of the play, John directly mentions the word "political correctness" showing that *Oleanna's* message is related to controversy over discourses about political correctness. To understand the problem of political correctness embodied in conflict between John and Carol appropriately, it is essential to comprehend contemporary political issues of American history.

*Oleanna's* theme subsumes not only gender politics materialized in issue of 'sexual harassment' but also multi-layered problems of American society. While liberals stressed agendas related to multiculturalism, political correctness, social construction, and anti-essentialism, conservatives reaffirmed values of family, law and order, individual responsibility, fundamental rules, and one United States (Porter, 2000). Written in the post modernistic era, *Oleanna's* plot does not follow concrete cause and effect relations (Porter, 2000). Rather, the plot of the play discretely reflects conflicts in 1990s. Contention between Carol and John are the reflection showing bleak reality inflated with contention of McCarthyism, Vietnamese War, queer movements, the second wave feminism. Language representation in the play, thus, should be appreciated as "dramatic technique" devised to represent 1990s (Cho, 2007).

Discourses of political correctness movements were substantialized in communication of John and Carol, implying its effect. Furthermore, political correctness is utilized as a crucial instrument for subverting power structure in *Oleanna* where a complex map of gender, hierarchy, and language is concretely subsumed. Analyzing substantial issues of political correctness thus shows specific point where clashes of communities occur. Certainly, political correctness movement brought ambivalent results. In one side, it contributed to abolition against discrimination and marginalization by defending rights of minorities. It also contributed for people to take oversimplified stance toward complex political struggles, which eventually made people overlook reality of society where actual hatred and anger could not be eradicated simply abandoning certain language (Cho, 2007). The ambivalence of political correctness is dramatized on John's language and counterattack of Carol (Hwang, 2000). Under vacuum state where primary purpose of enhancing most progressing discourses and activism can preserve, power dynamics between student and teacher are more visualized and clarified. Hence, understand power dynamics represented by John and Carol will clarify fundamental ideological problems reflected on them.

### **Ideology Struggle**

John is qualified for being the privileged. He is a man who can climb up social pyramid without confronting the problems of glass ceiling or wage discrimination. He is a teacher having absolute authority on campus. Under heteronormative ideology, he attains benefit as a married man. Most of all, he is a white man who could get vantage for acquiring his current socioeconomic status. His sex and race represent white men's history established by depriving rights of numerous others. "The white men's burden", thus, operates as moral responsibility accompanied by a sense of guilt. It explains the reason why political correctness is more strictly applied to white men than others. In sociopolitical spectrum, opportunities to becoming the privileged are not distributed equally to every person. Even though unintentionally situated on the place for the privileged, power can be easily implemented for manipulation and oppression against others. Therefore, revealing their immanent power should be cautiously regulated.

As language mediates individual power and its external expression, politically correct language was especially emphasized. In Act 1, power of language is materialized by communication between Carol and John. In their reciprocal

conversation, the proportion of speech and finishing sentence shows who have authority on relation. In Act 1, John frequently stems Carol's speech and completes unfinished sentences of Carol despite his lack of understanding toward her. John explains ambiguously defined "term of art" with pedantic sentences full of jargons and terminology. Although John's speech is more alike an explanation, its content does not have concrete information, which seems to discovering lack of will to interact with student. John's preach like explanation to Carol reminds a good example of the word "Mansplain" even though crucial gap between Carol and John is founded on hierarchy between teacher and student. Clearly, John has ascendancy over Carol in every aspect. Even though the privileged should concern about possibilities of exerting their power through their language and practices, John was not cautious enough to contemplate his privilege as a white elite man. After John's vain explanation, Carol makes clear about her own situation. With her incomplete sentences full of emotional outburst, she demonstrates she belongs to different socioeconomic stratum compared to John's position, which means there had been more obstacles for her to overcome. By her line, Carol plainly points her difference with John.

However, Act 1 does not show for John to self-reflect about his situation. When communicating with his counterpart through phone, John uses fragmentary sentences lacking some grammatical elements. With Carol, on the contrary, his speech is composed with articulated sentences full of academic vocabularies. John's language shows a glimpse of John's preconception about his intellectual superiority to Carol. At the same time, John overlooks Carol's pressure in university. While Carol keeps failing to put proper name for her thoughts and feelings, John dislocates her thoughts arbitrarily to other context with lines like "I'm not your father", "let's get on with it", "Let's take the mysticism from it". From this process of miscommunication, Carol's anger is aggravated by John's language and attitude.

John's special treatment of Carol even aggravates the situation worse by divulging his problematic perspective as the privileged. John promises special lesson solely for Carol. MacLeod (1995) especially gives attention to the verb "say" which is constantly recurred in John's speech. The verb functioning as imperative signifies that John is dominating power between relationships with Carol. When John "says", he breaks the codes and rules of university. When John speaks out "Say this is the beginning", half-passed class goes back to the start. When John grades Carol "A" by his saying, the whole effort to get a good grade becomes meaningless process (MacLeod, 1995). John's constant misuse of 'definition' unintentionally suggests Carol the way to usurp power of language against him. In Act 2 and 3, Carol deliberately chooses facts and interprets it with her ideological framework as the way she wants by cautiously chosen language. By her line "I say it was not. I SAY IT WAS NOT", Carol defines the truth arbitrarily with reasons defended by her 'group' as John's action and words are defended by institutional authority of university (MacLeod, 1995).

John misled Carol to participate in power game between student and teacher because of lack of understanding about his advantageous status. As a result, he misused language of the privileged. But it would be excessive to say he deserved deprivation of his every social status on behalf of elites, males, and whites. John did not have intention to exert his power. He did not aim to exploit or oppress

Carol. Rather, he tried to sympathize Carol and to find a solution. Sudden subversion of power depicted on Act 2 and 3 is, then, can be interpreted as a power abuse of Carol who reducing every language of John to ideological problems.

In many aspects, ideology sustained by Carol debunks weaknesses of political correctness itself. The gradual advance of Carol's reprobation against John in Act 2 shows her problematic ideology. When John denounces myth about higher education in university despite his craving for tenureship, Carol labels him "elitist". When John ridicules belief of guaranteed stable future by attending university but shows his contradiction by wanting to purchase a house in wealthy neighborhood, he becomes "classist" by Carol. Lastly, he gains disgraceful label "sexist" for calling tenure committees' members "Men" (Hwang, 2000). John's contradiction between attitudes and speech might be deserved reprobation. But it was minute mistake caused the label "sexist". Carol's logic is seamlessly progressed but becoming exaggerated. For upsetting Carol through his pedantic language and divulging the fact that absolute authority of teacher was a house of cards, John becomes the target of loathing of Carol. Carol's hatred against John is replaced by her group's ideology.

The word "group" emphasized in Act 2 delineates Mamet's critical thoughts against society. To deliver voice of political agents in social sphere, achieving self-consciousness from perceiving one's identity was crucial for minority groups. Valid codes and standards of language usage and attitude were achieved during self-awaring process of identity politics. Certain standards and principles helped political groups censoring offensive words and actions against their groups. But certain principle and standard extended too much that they were just implemented only for the purpose to derogate opponents. In fact, too many rules and regulations for establishing nonoffensive cultural atmosphere were actually making society barren. Strict rules of political correctness could tolerate only limited contents of conversation. In the commentary of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, Mamet quoted "American capitalism comes down to one thing . . . the operative maxim is 'Hurrah for me and fuck you.' Anything else is a lie" (as cited in MacLeod, 1995). The logic of zero-sum game that Mamet criticized is presented in the oration of Carol highly resorting to gender politics. Carol utilizes her group's logic in order to find loophole of a white privileged man having authority in hierarchical academia (MacLeod, 1995). She ideologizes every contents of John's speech. While primary purpose of political correctness was to eradicate cultural prejudices and discriminations, political correctness movement contradictorily dismissed to account actual discriminations in social realm. Censoring one's remarks on behalf of minority group actually prohibited possibilities of genuine understanding toward each other. Thus, abusing political correctness in turn brought backlash from conservatives, accused for causing severe conflicts among communities. It is significant that Carol's rationales are relied on factual evidence supported by her group. Albeit John's words and actions are not wholly targeting toward a mere individual, his remarks and actions are reduced to assault against the group where Carol belongs.

The problem of language is aggravated in Act 3. Carol posits John as absolute adversary with her dogmatic attitude. She negates any opinions opposing to her thoughts (Hwang, 2000). In Act 3, Carol abuses the issue of "sexual harassment"



to justify her political ideology (Hwang, 2000). This triggered audiences and critics to analyze Carol as an archetype of fiendish feminist threatening men. Generally, men cannot escape from reproach as an assaulter in sexual harassment case. Representation of John as a victim of power play made people commiserate John who was understood as the embodiment of lost American masculinity (MacLeod, 1995). As public's response showed, it is evident that Carol's decision in Act 3 is problematic. She does not deal with the matter of 'victimhood' that should have been dealt in cautiously. Instead, she carelessly misuses "sexual harassment" issue to usurp power from John. Carol's choice shows misleading of victimization. Her abuse of gender politics also warns the result of extreme endorsement of political correctness. Carol's deed shows transit of human being becoming a vehicle of ideology in the end. Without understanding and compromising of each other, there is no place for language to intervene. Only violence could externalize inner emotion of characters on the stage of antagonism. With swearing misogynistic words, John beats Carol at the climax. It is significant that Carol's last line is "Yes, That's right", mumbled after brutally beaten at the corner of the stage. The play ends up with consummating typical representation of assaulting man and victimized woman.

While John represents moral problems that WASP should confront with in diversified American society (Hwang, 2000) Carol shows that reinforcing political correctness can actually oppress or manipulate others (Cho, 2007). In short, John represents language misuse, which was the primary reason of occurrence of political correctness movement, and Carol abuses the rule of political correctness on behalf of her group.

#### **The Significance of *Oleanna***

Mamet shows his critical perspective over problems held by the name of political correctness and the history of WASP in his work. In the core of the problematic conflicts among political groups, there has been desire of captivating power. His constant portrayal of characters confronting problems of miscommunication specifies this perspective (Mohammed, 2009). Language is token of groups' socioeconomic traits connected with their identity problems. In *Oleanna*, John uses terminologies that middle-class or upper middle-class elite men can comprehend from philosophical, educational jargons to terms related to practical matters like real estates. It seems almost impossible for an undergraduate college student to comprehend John's language. Considering Carol's socioeconomic background and age, her predicaments in this relation is somewhat predictable at first sight. From introduction of Carol and even after being accused John gives a lengthy and pointless explanation toward Carol. John's pedantic language reflects the exclusiveness of academia prohibiting real connection with students.

In contrast, Carol's lines clearly deliver the message concerning with language of others from different socioeconomic background. It is estimable that Carol's ultimate goal was to become one of the grown-up with power and respect just like John. But John's pedagogy caused confusion and skepticism, consequently drove Carol to become emotional. He fails to interpret intertwined problem of Carol's sentimental and intellectual state deprived of recognition from others. Instead of modestly admits miscomprehension of Carol and strives to find out a way to solve her problem, John shows superficial empathy by

juxtaposing his own childhood experience with Carol's. The process was therefore inevitably subjected to be misunderstood. By fatal miscommunication between Carol and John, audience can delineates sociocultural context of American society containing concrete contention between different groups. Carol and John deliberately select elements of each other's language that can be reduced to identity problem transpiring ideological struggle. Where the main purpose of communication is erased, only power struggles of characters remain. The failure of understanding connects with the fall of American dream that once conceived as the hope for subsuming different voices from diverse groups is grimly described on John and Carol.

Considering conflict among diverse groups is immanent subject of the play, we should examine more carefully about Carol's line demonstrating her desire to "understand" which reiterated several times. Carol's struggling to get "understanding" from John makes people to pose question about primary cause of her action. Tracing and reasoning cause and effect of characters' language and action shed a light on solving intermingling problems. Antagonism between two characters is analogue to a phase of society. Emotional impact of violent climax also leads audience to start questioning cause of conflicts of men and women or the privileged and unprivileged which is reflected on the matter of political correctness. Ultimately, people can start to contemplate the way to overcome social problem. Thus, *Oleanna* affects audience to think cause and solution. *Oleanna* is not a simple representation of gender politics but a slice of reality of cultural struggle led by political ideology. As the recent American cultural war recurs the problems over colorblindness, victimhood, and oppressions again, analyzing Mamet's *Oleanna* at this point sheds a light to reinforce the major cause of cultural clash in social realm.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Contention between John and Carol shows the fall of politics of difference remained only deepened confrontation in American history. In this context, it is crucial to understand the relation of subjectivity and identity represented in *Oleanna*. Situating John and Carol to a socioeconomical map is useful to connect their language justifying their logics and their identity. John identified himself only as an individual not as political agency, which made him fail to understand structural contradiction aggravating Carol's situation. Carol, on the other hand, antagonizes every aspects of John and transferred his remarks to ideological problem. The result of their conflict is bleak sociocultural wasteland only violence can be preserved. Both rigid political languages categorizing people and total individualization without concerning socioeconomic context composing political agency is dangerous. Where the place for compromising is founded, the real communication can be occurred.

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