

Re-reading Sexuality and Racism in Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*

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Abstract

Shelagh Delaney is considered one of the pioneers of kitchen sink realism, highly innovative in breaking taboos and attacking orthodoxies of the mid twentieth English society. Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* presents a slice of working-class life, their dreams and aspirations, trials and tribulations. It deals with social realism, depicting domestic situations of Britons living in cramped rented accommodation and attempts to explore controversial social and political issues. The play comprises of a deep concern for the forces that marginalize and deal with different forms of marginality. The playwright provides a realistic account of the 'Other', those who exist on the margins and are persecuted and inhumanly barred from all sphere of life. This paper explores the issues of race, class and gender as they affect the lives of different individuals caught in varied scenarios.

Keywords: Kitchen-sink realism, marginalisation, racism, taboo, orthodoxies, homosexuality

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Shelagh Delaney is considered one of the pioneers of kitchen sink realism, a literary genre that presents realistic and unsentimental portraits of working-class British life in the mid twentieth century. Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* presents a slice of working-class life, their dreams and aspirations, trials and tribulations. It deals with social realism, depicting domestic situations of Britons living in cramped rented accommodation and attempts to explore controversial social and political issues. The play comprises of a deep concern for the forces that marginalize and deal with different forms of marginality. The playwright provides a realistic account of the 'Other', those who exist on the margins and are persecuted and inhumanly barred from all sphere of life.

Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey* revolves around many controversial and provocative themes, breaking the English stereotypes and creating a stir on being staged. The plot comprises of a love story between a white girl and a black boy, an out of wedlock child, a homosexual character, a reference to abortion and child neglect. The entire play is set in a humble, low class setting in which characters suffer from alcoholism, use abusive language and "vocabulary, idiom and syntax that is freshly colloquial in ways that middle and upper class English speech is not" (Oberg 161). The Act of 1958 had perhaps emboldened Delaney and she got the liberty to use scandalous and bold themes which had remained absent from the English stage till then. According to Arthur Marwick the Act of 1958 "made literary quality a defence against prosecutions of obscenity in literature (Marwick 195).

However, the play contains ample amount of ambiguity. Delaney makes a pleasant black man date the lead female protagonist who impregnated her and deserted her forever. She refers to abortion but fails to go into its specifications, never describing the inherent chaos and turmoil felt by a character. She just calls it "terrible", failing to elaborate on the pros and cons of such an action. Geof, the male character has been moulded with imperfections. He has been included by Delaney with the purpose of correcting the way homosexuality has been depicted in the past. Christopher Innes in *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* says that she included a gay character to rectify "what she perceived as insensitivity in the way (Terrence) Rattigan portrayed homosexuality" (Innes 80). Rattigan, the prominent mid-century dramatist used "the theme of disguised personality" as a dominant motif (Innes 80). The portrayal of the gay character in the play is very subtle. He makes use of hints, symbols and dramatic codes to convey the ailment of the homosexual characters to the audience.

A Taste of Honey is set in Salford, a city and metropolitan region in the county of Greater Manchester in Lancashire, England. The play's protagonists are Jo and Helen, a poor mother and daughter living in an ugly flat. Shelagh Delaney draws on the history and the cultural image of Manchester, as well as on her own life for this grim portrait of working-class Northern life. The North of England, mainly Manchester was shaped by the Industrial Revolution marking a shift from agrarian to industrial setup. As per historians this shift can be divided into the first Industrial Revolution (1760–1840), which was confined only to Britain, and a second Industrial Revolution, which extended into other regions during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. The remarkable shift from handicrafts and farming to factory production brought many workers into the cities of Britain, and they often experienced low wages and poor urban living conditions.

However, even though the factories brought prosperity, over-crowding and industrial pollution left its impact in the northern parts of England. In *A Taste of Honey*, Helen refers to Manchester's factories, recalling climbing a hill from which “you could see the mills in the distance” (Delaney 8) Manchester, being already prone to fog because of its proximity to the Pennine Hills, was subject to smog due to industrial pollution. As per the city reports, the city sometimes saw only 970 hours of sunshine a year, in the decades leading up to the 1960s. This figure later improved through anti-pollution efforts. In the play, Peter calls Helen and Jo's new neighborhood in Manchester a place of “tenements, cemeter[ies], [and] slaughterhouse[s]”(Delaney 9). Delaney exposes the complex dynamics of class, sexuality and race in this ethos.

Homosexuality has existed throughout history, in all types of society, among all social classes and peoples, and it has survived qualified approval, indifference and the most vicious persecution. But what have varied enormously are the ways in which various societies have regarded homosexuality, the meanings they have attached to it, and how those who were engaged in homosexual activity viewed themselves. (Weeks 2)

Jeffrey Weeks expressing his opinion about the understanding of the nature of homosexuality states that it is a universal phenomenon and a tendency that manifests itself in human species. The infatuation between individuals of the same sex has always been there, even though different terms were used in different eras and in different cultures: “Male invert in classical Rome were termed *cinaedi*, in medieval court culture 'catamites', in eighteenth-century London bars 'mollies', in living memory 'fairies’” (Mills 257).

To discern homosexuality and how it has been perceived in Great Britain since the 19th century, it is important to note that homosexual sex acts remained a crime from 1885 to 1967. When the 1553 Buggery law was passed in England, the reasons for persecution remained the same, even though persecution of sodomy moved from the religious domain into the legal domain. This law had an impact on the way homosexual individuals were perceived in society, In *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault traces how homosexuality never ceased to pose a problem in society: the framework of persecution, from religious to legal to finally medical institutions was evolved to deem it unnatural. All these institutions found a way to state that homosexuality was ‘unnatural’ and needed to be punished and/or treated. In 1952, the British mathematician Alan Turing had been convicted of "gross indecency," or homosexuality. There are speculations that his death by cyanide poisoning, ruled a suicide, was due to social and professional exclusion following his conviction. The Wolfenden Report was issued by the Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution in Great Britain in 1957. Based on findings in psychoanalysis and social science, the report recommended decriminalization of homosexuality in Britain. However, it was only ten years later that Sexual Offences Act of 1967 was passed, decriminalizing sexual acts between men age 21 or older.

Delaney can be considered a non-conformist and a rebel, dealing with homosexuality in her play. At the time, the Lord Chamberlain was responsible for licensing and censoring plays and it was till 1958 that this law prevailed. Delaney was the first dramatist successfully to overcome the archaic, censorial ban on stage plays that openly depicted homosexual characters or discussed homosexuality. Her sympathetic portrayal of the play's young, gay student was, therefore, ground-breaking and revolutionary. Until then playwrights tried to evade the censor's veto by resorting to stratagem and innuendo. When *A Taste of Honey* was submitted for licensing it caused uproar and was criticised on the grounds

of being indecent. As Dan Rabellato argues, “To criticise authors of the period for shirking homosexual representation in their work is inappropriate. For one thing, Lord Chamberlain would not have it” (Rabellato 184). The Lord Chamberlain's assistant comptroller, Brigadier Norman Gwatkin, commented: “I think it's revolting, quite apart from the homosexual bits ... To me it has no saving grace whatsoever. If we pass muck like this, it does give our critics something to go on” (Jongh). But the Lord Chamberlain's chief play-reader, Charles Heriot, judged: “It is concerned with the forbidden subject in a way that no one I believe could take exception to”(Jongh). The Lord Chamberlain agreeing to Heriot's view, licensed the play. It is a high probability that Delaney's treatment of the subject and the favourable critical and public response to the play played a significant role in persuading the lord chamberlain partially to relax his ban on homosexuality and portrayal of gays a few months later. The norms of the past, especially those used by Rattigan felt dated and unnecessary to her and therefore she opted to construct a Geoff, “self-tagging, individual homosexual, conducting himself with honesty, openness, and clarity” (Rabellato 216).

In *A Taste of Honey*, which is set in 1958, Jo is friends with a young gay man, Geof whom she calls “people like you” while Helen unleashes a string of insults at Geof, including “pansified little freak” (Delaney 58). Geof is keen on marrying Jo even though Jo emphasises that their love is not the “marrying” kind. Presumably, Geof's eagerness to marry is due to fear as being gay was still illegal in Britain in 1958. A heterosexual marriage would have given him some safety. As the *Time Magazine* hilariously equating homosexuality with femininity described the former “The homosexual in *A Taste of Honey* displays valour, humor, ethos, pathos, and a touching reminder that men who become women sometimes become good women”(Norriega 33). This comparison might be valid since Delaney makes Geof not only shower Jo with motherly love, take care of her, cook for her, and buy clothes for the baby, but also makes Jo tells him, “You're just like a big sister to me” (Delaney 54). Geof's homosexuality is side-lined by his insistence to become a straight family man. He lacks romantic interests and insists on becoming a “lavender” husband to Jo. Nevertheless, Delaney makes it very clear that Geof is gay and comes out as a progressive artist. Ignoring the fear of censorship, Delaney has boldly offered a possibility of an alternate family which includes a homosexual. The playwright breaks social conventions and norms by presenting this alternative and digressing from the established notions of family. Nicholas De Jongh writes: “Delaney has thus written the first major British play in which a gay and effeminate man is both ridiculed and approved, derided and accepted.”(Jongh)

In the 19th century, British colonialism had reached its pinnacle of dominance, including colonies, territories and regions across the world under their domain. Sometimes, the colonised subjects moved to Great Britain willingly and at other times they were brought there as slaves. It was only in 1833 that the British Parliament abolished slavery. During the 19th century, many black people who had been initially brought to Britain as slaves were confined to the trades of footman, coachman, soldiers or merchant seamen, After the end of the First World War, Britain experienced a massive inflow of Caribbean immigrants which also evident after World War II. Though Great Britain lacked laws and rules of racism, it still existed. An implied social barrier based on skin colour prevented black people from entering many professions. In 1931 a League of Coloured People was formed to fight racial segregation and discrimination in Great Britain.

Delaney's play deals with characters who live at the periphery of the 190s English society; whether it is Helen and Jo who belong to the working class or the homosexual Geof or Jo who is black by ethnicity. The social marginalization experienced by

these characters stems from their class, gender or race. They are nonconformists and unconventional in their bearing which is a result of the generational shift that is happening in the social life of England and the transformation in the cultural setup of the country as the populace is becoming more diverse. Helen has a conventional mind-set and categorizes people according to the socially acceptable behaviour. Jo on other hand is progressive and defends the contrary point of view and has love and respect for the social or racial differences. She is tolerant of the differences of others and avoids judging or demeaning them. Jo's character is suggestive of the probability and potential for a group of diverse people to blend together and live in harmony and peace through mutual respect and acceptance. Her presence gives these character ample amounts of freedom to be their original self and they blend in the social setup without facing any social criticism or ostracism.

Jo accepts these characters as they are and embraces the diversity of the people around her with love and compassion. Her relationship with a black boy is an attempt to subvert societal norms and dogmas. She is not scared of being seen with him rather to the surprise of Jimmie she kisses him in the streets. Her attitude towards him is of respect and tolerance. He tells her that she is the first person who doesn't mind his skin colour. This mind-set of Jimmy is a reflection of stereotypical attitude of the whites towards interracial relationships in England.

Jo accepts Geof inspite of his sexual diversity. She jokingly asks him provocative questions and guesses that his landlady asked him to vacate the house after seeing him with a man. She is curious about "people like (him)" which offends Geof.(Delaney 53). She soon realises that she has been rude and insensitive to him and apologises for hurting his emotions. Soon they get to know each other and she begins valuing and appreciating him for being able to take care of the house and her emotional needs. Jo herself is disgruntled with the societal gender norms and states "I hate babies;" "I hate motherhood;" "I don't want to be a mother;" "I don't want to be a woman" (Delaney 54). She is repulsed by the ideas of womanhood and motherhood and refuses to embrace either. She considers gender norms stifling and baseless. Geof contradicts her by stating that motherhood comes naturally to women. Jo replies, "It comes natural to you, Geoffrey Ingram. You'd make somebody a wonderful wife."(Delaney 53). Hence Delaney subverts conventional gender roles and asserts that gender roles are fluid and not fixed. Individuals are free to take up the role that fits them.

Helen on the other hand is brutally judgmental and follows societal expectations of gender identity. Her attitude towards Geof is a reflection of the societal prejudices towards homosexuals. She is unable to treat Geof with respect and attacks him for being feminine. She is critical of Jo's decision to live with a homosexual man and wishes that she had chosen "something more like a man."(Delaney 57). Helen not only rejects homosexuality but suffers from racial prejudice. She is symbolic of the conventional society which is not ready to accept social change or welcome inclusiveness. When she hears that her daughter might give birth to a black boy, she is shocked and considered it a bigger taboo than being called a slut. Without caring about her daughter's happiness she leaves to have a drink, thereby suggesting that her social reputation was much more important than her daughter's well-being. Jo's attitude on the other hand connotes that generational change is on the way and radiated hope that there is scope for diverse people to live together in peace and harmony.

Hence, Delaney explores the issues of race, class, and gender as they affect the lives of different individuals caught in scenarios. She has radicalised not only the

themes but also the style and structure of the play. The playwright has brilliantly documented the dilemma of the people living on the periphery of the society in order to expose and alter their condition. The inability of the society to treat everybody uniformly, directly affects these characters. They battle discrimination and subjugation, continuing to endure social isolation. However, Delaney's characterisation of Jo points towards the optimistic possibility for diverse individuals to live together in harmony and solidarity without being subdued by societal norms. The idea of the birth of a mixed race baby suggests social diversification and tolerance. The play is a promoter of the idea that socially diverse individuals should be met with love and care to enable their amalgamation in the mainstream of the society.

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