**Critical Evaluation of Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey***

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1950s witnessed a drastic change in the history of British drama. The publication of John Osborne’s masterpiece, *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 radicalised the British theatre. The play was a blow against establishment. Osborne portrayed Jimmy Porter, the anti-hero of the play. He is frustrated and malcontent. He attacks the establishment in every sense. Following the success of this play, a generation of writers emerged who are labelled as “angry young men”, though they were not a unified group. This media-created uncommon group included John Osborne, Kinsgsley Amis, John Wain, Collin Wilson, Allan Sillitoe, John Arden, Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter. Shelagh Delaney, after publication of her successful and rebelling play, *A Taste of Honey* (1956) had been included in this group but it may not be appropriate to stick the journalistic label “angry young men” to her because she differs from most of them and the label itself obviously implies its patriarchal nature.

This “new wave” of British young playwrights had tried to radicalise not only themes but also structures and styles of their plays. Hostile to anything that was “high-brow”, these British playwrights were revolutionary in dealing with working class characters and themes. They rejected the style and subject of educated upper middle class. Expressing the discontent and frustration of the newly educated lower class, they were explicitly and intensely against establishment. Their plays were termed as “Kitchen-Sink” Drama. It was a term that gained popularity in Britain in the middle and late 1950s. The term refers to pays which were set in ordinary domestic settings. They depict lower strata of British society and their struggle to survive in post-war period. According to Collin’s Dictionary, it is a term which refers to a type of drama of the 1950s depicting sordid aspects of domestic reality.

A socio-economic and psychological survey of post-war period of Britain exposes the fact that it was a time of broken dreams and belied hopes. The British faced economic depression, psychological frustration and socio-cultural instability after the world wars. Exploring tensions of the working class of the time, these plays were written realistically. They presented novelty in content. They were dismal and unrelentingly negative but destabilise many conventional traditions. In contrast to “drawing room” comedies popular on the stage nearly about a century, they exhibited the humdrum lives of workers. They were, of course, works of serious art. They intended to impress rather than entertain as they exhibit the social and cultural contrast to the conventional matrix of a value system.

The Kitchen-sink drama depicted the everyday lives of ordinary people who struggle against the degredation of powerlessness, the loss of community or the deadening influence of the suburbia. it had a social message and ideological stance , which was largely leftist. İt explored the real and trashy side of life which was not royal and romantic like the characters of Shakespeare. İt expressed mood of restlessness, insatiable raw anger at the stale and stultifying system, disorganisation and frustration. The writers not only looked at social, political, cultural and religious institutions with contempt but they often did condensending comments against them. They presented the characters who were unboundedly rebelious and impatient with the status quo. İn contrast to the plays of Samuel Beckett, who dealt with larger philosophical questions like existence and meaning of human life, these dramatists did not focus on such universal, metaphysical and mystic issues nor they offer us some wide-ranging answers to the problems they displayed. A unique as pect of their plays was that they re-examine the socio-cultural and themes like class, race, gender and sexuality. Presenting marginalised persons on stage, these dramatists tried to delve deep into their problems. Observing closely the British society of 1950s, they exposed all their anger, anxities, tensions and frustrations of this lower class people.

Shelagh Delaney was only eighteen when she wrote *A Taste of Honey*. Attaining massive attention, the play had a great publishing history. On 27th May, 1958, it was successfully performed by theatre workshop in the Theatre Royal, London. At Wyndham’s Theatre, it was hit. It was also performed at New York. In 1961, the play was filmed. It is unique in many ways. It violates the traditional concepts of a structure, style, content and language of a play. Like a modern play, it has only two acts. It has neither a plot nor a “hero” in conventional terms. It has a domestic setting. It presents personal relationships of characters in common and colloquial language of lower class lacking the grand verbal expressions of Marlowe or Shakespeare.

The play is set in Salford, northern England. The character of the play represents the people who were from working class and marginalised by the main stream. It depicts a story of Jo, a teenage girl .She lives with her mother, Helen who is a whore. Helen constantly moves from one flat to another. Both of them have no fixed home. Jo has an affair with Jimmie, a black sailor. He makes her pregnant and leaves for his duty. Helen leaves Jo after marrying with Peter. Jo is left alone. She is taken care by Geof who is accommodated by her in the flat. He is a homosexual art student who provides maternal affection to Jo.

Like other Kitchen-sink dramatists, Shelagh Delaney deals with working class themes and characters. She presents a working class experience which previously excluded on stage. Jo and Geof are artists. They are the youth who lack financial and social security. Jo claims that she and Geof are communists. It implies that they are different from the capitalist system represented by Peter. The dramatist explores the intricate and complex relationship not only between a daughter and mother but also between a mixture of people. Moreover, it presents controversial issues and displays quite different perspectives on family and marriage, love and relationship, man and woman. Today, it is considered as one of the seminal plays written by a “new wave” writer in which some key issues like motherhood, sexuality and ethnic background are demonstrated quite unconventionally and radically. John Russell Taylor, a literary critic in his *Anger and After* commented that there are no themes that you can isolate and study outside the dramatic context in A *Taste of Honey*. It seems that he tried to imply that it can only present a strong message with the art and inputs of actors, a director and the stage but this critical view is partial because the text of the play opens up many layers hidden in socio-cultural and psychological dynamics of the British people of that time.

In addition to this, the British stage of 1950s was dominated by the man. It was male-controlled world in which Shelagh Delaney (a woman writer) had a sincere effort to present women’s point of view and their concerns. She does not portray her female characters as passive objects. They are active and they have power to choose and decide. They are centrally placed in the play. They have been presented vocal, individualistic and brave to express their ideas and act and enjoy their personal freedom.

Our perception of family is a direct consequence of the social world in which we inhibit. In western culture, family is a universal unit. The term is implied for the persons, mainly husband (male) and wife (female) who loves and cares for each other and contributes selflessly to nurture their children. In 1950s the British largely believed in a Nuclear family. It enjoyed its heyday during this period in Britain. But shockingly this play does not emphasize this widely accepted concept. Shelagh Delaney’s depiction of family differs from the conventional notion of the term. The family of Jo and Helen is without father, a patriarchal and authoritative figure. Moreover, the dramatist does not show the relationship of a mother and daughter traditionally. It is rather complex. She shows us that there is very little nurturance.

Arthur Marwick notes that “Of all children born in 1955, 5 percent were illegitimate.”**1** Shelagh Delaney has picked up from this marginal group and an illegitimate child like Jo is placed centrally. It could be highly condemnable. As far as the traditional concepts of home and family are concerned, the playwright deviates from them. Even family boundaries are also not clearly drawn in the play. The constant shifting of home also implies an imbalance in the family and family affection is questionable.

The dramatist deliberately distorts the conventional and stereotyped notion of an ideal nuclear family by presenting us the characters who play unconventional roles. Both, Jo and Helen, neither like to mother a child nor wish to accept it. Moreover, Jo and Geof live quite happily and create a kind of asexual family which is completely unconventional and disliked by most of people. At the end of the play, Jo’s baby is expected to be black; this also questions the institution of family. In addition, it also foregrounds the issue of race.

Shelagh Delaney, therefore, brings a radical change in a notion of family as an institution created and perceived by hegemonic and patriarchal attitudes. Moreover, she also brings to light the conventional notion of homosexuality and how can be a threat to a traditionally-structured family following culturally-accepted norms and values. She explores a radical concept of family which sees everyone equal. The playwright presents us a possibility of an asexual family where the traditional roles are reversed: a male can nurture more happily than the woman. Jo is provided motherly care and warmth by Geof, a homosexual. The play as she presents is a kind of resistance to the internalised and institutionalised concept of family which is mostly patriarchal in nature.

Shelagh Delaney deviates from the concept of motherhood as it is understood traditionally. Conventionally, motherhood implies a capacity to mother a legitimate child. It implies love for children. It is a source of warmth, and security. Delving deep, the institution of motherhood was created by the male. It is for male. Controlled by the male, it is a product of patriarchy. The dramatist depicts mothers unconventionally. The mothers in the play, Helen and Jo do not accept their traditional role prescribed by the patriarchal culture. Helen opposes the conventional duties of a mother. She can’t provide a stable home to Jo. She is described by the writer as a semi-whore. She is selfish and marries with Peter. Her character distorts the idealisation of mother as a powerful source of love, warmth and care as expected from traditional mothers. The relationship between mother and daughter is characterised by feelings of abandonment, and painful disjointedness. Rejected by her mother, Jo tells: “She had so much love for everyone, but none for me”**2** Jo dislikes being a mother. Both raise pertinent questions about their stereotyped images of a mother, a daughter and a woman. As characters of a kitchen-sink drama, they display their anger, tension and frustration against male-developed conventions. They exhibit their wrath against the male-dominated establishments.

The playwright also raises some radical issues concerning gender. It is important to note here that the idea of gender as a socially constructed concept was not developed during 1950s. The term “gender’ was provided its theoretical space after 1960. When the play was staged, homosexuality was considered a crime in society. With its corruptive power, it was not accepted in a family. The playwright has rebelled against the popular notion and portrayed the character of Jo as someone who is caring and responsible. She also reflects a realistic condition of such homosexuals. 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.”**3** In addition to it, Delaney presents the character of Jimmie who is loved by Jo. In an era when blackness was traditionally implied as inferiority, vulgarity and ignorance, she radically portrays love between a black sailor and white girl. This inter-racial relationship is not condemned. Moreover, it also proves Jo, a powerful girl who can take decisions. She shows that the English family is far from being homogenous.

The dramatist has portrayed a disrupted family life of post-war years of Britain. Bearing an illegitimate child (Jo) is an antiestablishment effort of Helen in 1950s. Moreover, she wipes out the dominating patriarchal structure of family. There is no husband and father in Jo’s family. Therefore, the dramatist has abolished a traditional family structure where father earns and a mother nurtures children. Helen can’t provide warmth and security to a fatherless Jo. The anger of Jo is an outcome of her feeling of financial, social and psychological insecurity. She is a representative of an angry youth who is not happy with the establishment.

It was time when homosexuality was considered a crime. In 1967, Sexual Offences Act was passed that ended the persecution of homosexual persons. Without the fear of censor, the writer daringly offers us a possibility of an alternative family which included a homosexual. Jo’s family is converse of traditionally applied concept. It distorts the traditional views. The playwright provides an option in place of a conventional family. Such creation of an alternative family breaks social convention. It is against established notions of family.

To conclude, it can be stated that Delaney reflected the reality of the working class in this play. She had provided power to the powerless. She had provided a stage to the woman, blacks, homosexuals and the poor youth to raise their issues. Through this play, the playwright had provided us a new narrative on the institutions of motherhood and family. She displayed her difference with the traditional approach to race, sexuality and gender. Her questioning of the rigid structures of conventions prevalent in her age in this play makes the work remarkable in literary history.

**References:**

1. Marwick, Arthur. *British Society Since 1945: The Penguin Social History of Britain*. UK: Penguin, 2003, p.64.
2. Delaney, Shelagh. *A Taste of Honey*. London: Methuen, p.72.
3. De Jongh, N. *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*. London: Routledge, 1992, p.93.