



Marginalization and the Search for Independence in Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey and Pam Gems's Piaf

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Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on women's marginalization in Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey and Pam Gems's Piaf due to their class and gender. In these plays, the protagonists follow their distinct values and norms that do not go hand in hand with the norms established by the patriarchal society. The paper examines A Taste of Honey and Piaf from a feminist point of view. Though written prior to the development of second wave feminism, A Taste of Honey does include some pivotal elements of the movement. The paper mainly focuses on what is known as socialist feminism which has first emerged in Britain and rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970. Both playwrights, however, present female characters and approach feminist issues in accordance with Britain's social and cultural context when they were staged.

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المخلص

يناول البحث مسرحية طعم العسل لشيلاغ ديلاني ومسرحية بياف لبام جيمس بهدف تسليط الضوء على فكرة التهميش الطبقي و الجنساني. تتبع بطلات المسرحيتين قيمهم وأعرافهن الفردية التي تتعارض مع المعايير التي وضعها المجتمع الأبوي. يناقش البحث فكرة القمع المجتمعي في مذاق العسل وبياف من وجهة نظر نسوية. تتضمن مسرحية مذاق العسل بعض العناصر المحورية للحركة النسوية على الرغم من كتابتها قبيل تطور الموجة النسوية الثانية. تركز الورقة البحثية بشكل رئيسي على ما يعرف بالنسوية الاشتراكية التي ظهرت لأول مرة في بريطانيا وبرزت على الساحة في ستينيات وسبعينيات القرن العشرين. عمَدَن ديلاني وجيمس على تقديم شخصيات نسائية بغية معالجة القضايا النسوية في إطار البيئة الاجتماعية والثقافية لبريطانيا من خلال عروضهما المسرحية.

Introduction

In feminist discourse, it is difficult to agree on what the term feminism means. Expressing her dissatisfaction to have a definite definition(s) for the term, Carmen Vasquez, in her article "Towards a Revolutionary Ethics" mentions

We can't even agree on what a "feminist" is, never mind what she would believe in and how she defines the principles that constitute honor among us. In key with the American capitalist obsession for individualism and anything goes so long as it gets you what you want. Feminism in America has come to mean anything you like, honey! (qtd. In Hooks 17)

Nevertheless, feminism, as an approach, comes as a reaction against gender inequality. It aims to end oppression, the exclusion/ marginalization of women and to empower women on the social, political, or economic levels. Depending on more than one single theory or philosophy, feminism is seen as a direct response to women's diverse needs and concerns. The paper mainly focuses on what is known as socialist feminism which has first emerged in Britain and rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970. As its name suggests, it emphasizes the interconnectivity "of gender analysis with class analysis." (Keyssar 127) i.e., the relationship between patriarchal and capitalist systems. Therefore, according to socialist feminists, all types of oppression weather based on gender, class, race and sexual orientation should be challenged. They think that patriarchy is not the only source of women's oppression as radical feminists claim but rather it is women's economic dependence upon men.

A Taste of Honey (1958) is written by Shelagh Delaney, a writer who belongs to the English working class, the social group that helps shape her "stage settings, characters, action and dialogue." (Leeming and Aston) Delaney, with the production of this play, is seen as part of "Angry Young Men," the label which is given to a group of writers- John Osborn and his masterpiece *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 as a notable example- who radicalized the

British theatre” (Rathod 1) depicting the bitter sense of disillusionment in the post war British society. However, it is subsequently “identified as a pre-feminist classic.” (qtd. in Komporaly 16) According to Trevor R. Griffiths and Margret Llewellyn Jones, the play’s production starts a “new way forward for women’s theatre.” (Ibid) In other words, before the publication of this play, there is no such move, especially by Delaney’s male contemporaries to place women at the centre of their dramas, but rather as subordinate to the interests, needs or desires of a male dominated social and cultural order.” (Leeming and Aston) In line with such views, it is not appropriate to proclaim Delaney as a member of “Angry Young Men,” the label that it, by itself, assumes patriarchy.

A Taste of Honey is set in Delaney’s northern industrial home town of Salford, Lancashire; in an ordinary, realistic domestic setting. It depicts the unconventional life of Jo and her mother Helen. It opens with these two women trying to move into a new flat. In it, Delaney endeavours to show her characters living at the margins of the 1950s English society, either because of their social class, gender, race or sexual orientation. Though it opens with the mother and daughter in their Salford flat, as the play progresses, it becomes clear that the concept of family is deconstructed with Helen having an illegal child, Jo. In other words, the traditional or patriarchal family structure of the father responsible for the family’s living and a mother for nurturing children is distorted. Besides, the relationship between the mother and daughter is characterized by lack of real affection and communication due to their different life expectations and the generation gap between them:

Helen: You bring them up and they turn round and talk to you like that. I would never have dared to talk to my mother like that when I was her age. She’d have knocked me into the middle of the next week. (12)

Nevertheless, the mother and daughter share many aspects. As women, they do not fit the ideal standards of the decade. They are unconventional and they do not submissively accept the traditionally prescribed roles of the patriarchal culture or society. Because of her poverty and lack of resources, Helen confesses her irresponsibility as a mother, never aspiring to be a good mother:

Jo: You should prepare my meals

Helen: Have I ever laid claim to being a proper mother? (35)

Due to her selfishness, Helen subverts the “mainstream ideology” (Komporaly 8) and moves to live with a rich abusive man, named Peter. She is described as a “semi-whore,” (7) a woman who cares for nothing except for herself. Therefore, Jo, with her sense that she is really abandoned by her mother, says “She had so much love for everyone, but none for me.” (72) Though Jo refuses to be seen as another version of her mother, or to have any affinities with her mother, insisting on her own uniqueness “there’s only one of me,” (50) she, in fact, parallels her mother in her actions. Much like her mother, once confronted by her pregnancy with a baby, “the fruit of her premarital sexual affairs,” (Ozturk 29) with a black boy, named

Jimmy, she rebels against the conventions of femininity. Expressing her frustration with gender categorization, she tells Geof, another deviant character, a homosexual who supports her, “I’ll kill it. I don’t want his baby, Geof. I don’t want to be a mother. I don’t want to be a woman.” (75) Jo’s choice not to be a mother and her desire to “have a space or room of her own situates her firmly in a feminist tradition that challenges the patriarchal ownership of women’s lives.” (Leeming and Aston) She feels that she has the potential to decide for herself and be independent. She breaks the conventional idea that family roles are fixed, subverting the long held view or the feminine mystique that sees, to use Friedan’s words, “the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity. [...] However, special and different, it is in no way inferior to the nature of man, it may even in certain respects be superior.” (qtd. in Komporalý 10)

Delaney wants to suggest that the concept of motherhood that Jo associates with womanhood and embraces neither is a product of patriarchy. Thus, to Geof, who finds that her attitude is shocking for he thinks that motherhood is natural in women, she ironically replies “It comes natural to you, Geoffrey Igram, You’d make somebody a wonderful wife.” (55) Perhaps, it is due to her own situation or her sense of guilt that she is rejecting to be a mother. She even feels unconcerned about society’s judgment of her. Therefore, in a culture that is best characterized by its double standardness of sexual morality, a woman like Jo, rather than men, has to pay for the ‘taste of honey,’ that leaves her with nothing but “the bitter taste of unwanted pregnancy,” (Leeming and Aston) and running the risk of being called “A silly little whore!” (62) With resilience, she decides to keep the baby despite the awareness of the pressure that her decision may bring her. She tells Helen “Do you know, for the first time in my life I feel really important. I feel as though I could take care of the whole world. I even feel as though I could take care of you, too!” (81) She decides to do so perhaps because she feels now responsible for a child, a living thing, because she will now be a mother. All this defies claims of feminism.

At the end of the play, Jo, after establishing herself as a dependent woman having found a job, is seen alone “in the first pangs of labour,” (Esche 73) left by her mother at this “weighted moment” (Ibid) just to have a drink. Jo’s isolation and suspension, as the feminist theatre critic Sue-Ellen Case believes:

reflect Delaney’s own historical situation as an isolated playwright, writing before the commencement of the feminist movement and its critique, but with the impulse towards staging the oppression and promise in the lived experience of women. (qtd. in Leeming and Aston)

It has already been mentioned that John Osborn’s 1965 production of *Look Back in Anger* has turned the page to a new kind of plays dealing with the working class and crucially scrutinizing society. Pam Gems’s *Piaf* (1978) is said by Burkman to be another example of this type of drama. In his words, Piaf “is about an angry woman rather than an angry man. Piaf does not look back in anger but angrily straight ahead making her way in a man’s world as best as she can.” (193)

As a post-war British playwright, Pam Gems, just like Shelagh Delaney approaches women’s conditions on the social and economic levels. In spite of the fact that Gem rejects

being labeled as a feminist playwright, her “play and her statements about theatre have consistently articulated a strong feminist vision.” (Keyssar 129) As the play opens, the audience are introduced to Piaf, a French singer, now struggling with the manager of the Cluny club where she works and who tries to help her offstage as she drunkenly collapses at the microphone. With resistance and independence, she tells the manager “Get your fucking hands off me, I ain’t done nothing yet...” (11) As the play progresses, it becomes clear that Piaf belongs to a lower social class and that she is aware of its limitations on her. Likewise, the play shows how class consciousness goes hand in hand with the male’s oppressive attitude towards women. To Emil who pokes fun of her for drinking from the finger bowl, Piaf defiantly and with no sense of humiliation says “All right, clever cock. Seen me drink- now you can watch me piss.”(16) Piaf is a vulgar woman, “a raging cockney” (Takkac 241) who does everything she can do to survive. Before achieving stardom, she has been surviving as both a singer and a whore on the streets, her past history that Louis Leplee, the club’s owner discovers.

Piaf, whether the young marginalized whore or the celebrity has been reduced to a mere product or a commodity, selling first sex and even then her art, the means of men’s commercial exploitation. Thus, the manager informs Piaf “Now listen, squirt. You-are money. And while you’re money you’ll do as I say. Here’s five hundred. Get yourself toffed up... I want you soignee. Sophisticated and elegant... . (22)

Piaf also falls a victim as three of her acquaintances at the Cluny club try to involve her in the killing of her patron, Louis Laplee. They try to use her to get information about where he keeps his money. In response to the inspector who violently and aggressively questions her, she says” I ain’t done nothing! (21) Living in this hostile world where everything has been commercialized, Piaf’s connection with Leplee near the end of his life is portrayed by Gems as “a professional advantage.” (Turner 198) The alleged story of Piaf’s involvement in the death of her benefactor, i.e., the scandal makes her famous and therefore be asked for an overnight booking:

Manager: Piaf, I’ve got you a booking.... You’ll be doing a guest appearance at the Pickup Club...it’s all about your life with Papa, ménage a’trois, that sort of thing. (22)

As a commodity, Piaf feels herself obliged to sell sex as she sings:

Piaf. When I go on to do a song, it’s me that comes on. They get the lot.

Josephine. Sure

Piaf. They see what they’re getting- everything I got.

Josephine. Sure... but learn how to save it.

Piaf. Nah.

Josephine. Kid, you can’t have an orgasm every single time you walk on stage.

Piaf. I can. (40)

Piaf's deep self-struggle appears whenever she finishes a performance "You don't want it to end. Show over... You've on your own again. (36) Whenever she is on the stage, Piaf, as Gems makes it obvious, wants to control her "fits" and "mouth" so as to take over "a brutal world." (Burkman 195) Trying to break out of the margins, she is obliged to follow the path of prostitution in her early life, acting the role of an interchangeable commodity with her friend Toine. Later in her life, she begins to express her sense of loneliness, and addiction to morphine. Gems makes use of Piaf's car accident as metaphor to reflect on her relation to Jean, her husband, a relation again built upon domination, hostility and violence. From the visit Jean makes to Piaf while she is in the hospital, it becomes clear that he intends to kill her and he is responsible of the car accident so as to get her money. This accusation is clear in the following dialogue:

Piaf. Oh, look who's here... only the ... who tried to finish me off...

Jean. Darling!

Piaf. [*swiping at him with a stick*]: Get him out!

Nurse. Steady, Madame, steady...

Piaf. Fucking murderer!

Jean. What do you mean! You're the one told me to step on it!

Piaf. Got it all worked out, have you? He thought he was going to cop the lot, the dips- (49)

Piaf, in her two marriages, does not succeed both as a wife and a mother. She is a failure to her little girl whom she has lost. However, the play ends with Piaf's reminiscing about her past, telling Toine that she "never could hang on to nothing." (70) The idea of nothingness acts as a refrain in the play. It, as Burkman puts it, "is as palpable as it is in *Waiting for Godot*, where there is 'Nothing to be done' and 'nothing happens'" (196). Ironically enough, Piaf does everything she can afford to live and survive. Thus, the play ends with her death and her last meaningful song, "Non, je ne regretted rien." (72), meaning "No, I don't regret anything" (my translation). The song, in fact, summarizes her whole life with her finally regretting nothing of it.

Conclusion

Piaf, in spite of the harsh reality that surrounds her, affirms herself triumphant through her pain and suffering. She is able to achieve agency as much as Jo in *A Taste of Honey*. Both protagonists attempt to prove their freedom regardless of the social and economic conditions they find themselves in. Though they do not get what they expect from life, they at least manage to survive.

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