

Critiquing the Institution of Family:  
Motherhood, Sexuality and Ethnic Background in Shelagh  
Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*

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Pro-gradu tutkielmassani tarkastelen Shelagh Delaney'n näytelmää *A Taste of Honey* (1958). Erityisesti käsittelen sitä kuinka perheen instituutio kuvataan kyseisessä näytelmässä, ja kuinka tämä hegemoninen, patriarkaalinen instituutio kyseenalaistetaan erilaisten toiseuksien kautta. Näistä toiseuksista keskityn erityisesti äitiyteen, seksuaalisuuteen ja etniseen taustaan.

1950-luvun loppupuoli oli draaman murrosaikaa Englannissa. Tällöin esille nousi uusi nuorten näytelmäkirjailijoiden sukupolvi. Nämä dramatikot kritisoivat englantilaisen yhteiskunnan rajoittuneisuutta ja ajatusmaailman ahtautta, ja pyrkivät tuomaan esille sodanjälkeisen ajan lohduttomuuden ja juurettomuuden. Lisäksi he keskittyivät työväenluokkaisiin teemoihin ja henkilöhahmoihin, antaen äänen tälle aikaisemmin unohdetulle ryhmälle. *A Taste of Honey* on yksi tämän ajan merkittävistä teoksista, ja tuo naisnäkökulman 1950-luvun muuten hyvin miesvaltaiseen teatterimaailmaan.

Tutkielmani teoreettisena lähtökohtanani on Antonio Gramscin teoria hegemoniasta. Hegemonialla tarkoitetaan tilaa, jossa tietty vallalla oleva ideologia nähdään kulttuurisena normina. Perheen instituutiosta puhuttaessa tämä hegemoninen tila oli 1950-luvulla patriarkaalinen ydinperhe, jonka tarkasti määriteltyä rakennetta pyrittiin sodanjälkeisenä aikana ylläpitämään niin lainsäädännön kuin sensuurinkin avulla. Tällä pyrittiin estämään ei-toivottujen elementtien pääsy niin perheeseen kuin perheen kautta koko kansakuntaan. Perheellä oli tärkeä rooli kansakunnan yhtenäisyyden ylläpitäjänä, ja siksi sen rajoja monitoroitiin tarkasti.

*A Taste of Honey* pyrkii murtamaan tätä hegemonista näkemystä sisällyttämällä perheeseen siihen ennenkuulumattomia elementtejä. Näytelmän naiset eivät suostu siihen, että heidän identiteettinsä määritetään pelkästään äitiyden kautta, vaan pyrkivät luomaan oman määritelmänsä naiseudelle ja täten epätasapainottavat perheen rakennetta. Delaney käsittelee myös etnisen taustan vaikutusta perheen instituutioon hahmojensa ihonvärin ja kansallisuuden kautta, sekä sisällyttää homoseksuaalisuuden perheen rajojen sisälle. Näin Delaney luo näytelmässään vaihtoehdoisen perheen, jonka kautta hän kyseenalaistaa perinteisen perheen käsitteen.

Asiasanat: perhe, hegemonia, toiseus, äitiys, seksuaalisuus, etninen tausta

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## 1. Introduction

In my thesis I will be analysing Shelagh Delaney's play *A Taste of Honey*, performed for the first time in 1958 in London. I will examine Delaney's play as a text, and will not deal with the ways in which it has been and could be produced on stage. I am concentrating my study on the way in which family is represented in *A Taste of Honey*, and on different factors that influence the institution of family, that is to say motherhood, sexuality and ethnic background. I will also compare *A Taste of Honey* to the other plays of the same period, the late 1950s, and try to show how Delaney's depiction of family differs from the image represented by the mainly male playwright generation. My aim is to show how Delaney destabilises the institution of family, one of the foundations of nation, and in so doing can be seen to destabilise the entire notion of nationhood itself.

Firstly, concentrating on motherhood, Delaney does not present us with mothers that accept their roles. Rather, she shows us that women can question their motherhood and through that even their womanhood; that women can and do refuse to be defined by their motherhood. Furthermore, the question of ethnic background in relation to family also comes to the foreground as one of the characters – herself of Irish origin – is pregnant with a baby that will be partly black, partly white. This question of racial and national origin brings another factor to the discussion concerning family: how does ethnicity relate to the institution of family? In addition to motherhood and ethnic background, the question of sexuality is central to the idea of family. Delaney explores the role and threat of homosexuality to the family unit, and presents us with the possibility of an asexual family where the stereotypical gender roles are reversed: the male is more nurturing than the woman, the biological mother. These unconventional familial roles constitute a new kind of family unit, again distorting the conventional myth of an ideal nuclear family.

Thus, these questions of motherhood, sexuality and ethnic background in relation to the institution of family, especially that of the patriarchal nuclear family, will be at the centre of my thesis. I will explore the ways in which these different Other-positions affect the hegemonic institution of family and through it the construction of Englishness. Thus, I will attempt to address these issues with the help of several theoretical perspectives. Mostly I will be using studies of family, motherhood, ethnicity and sexuality as my main fields of study. I will also be using sociological studies in my thesis and attempt to show what English society was like when *A Taste of Honey* was written in order to form an idea of what the hegemonic view on family was in the 1950s, and how controversial the ideas presented in this play were in that context. I will also compare how these issues are represented in the other plays of the era, with their male-dominated view of the world. Since I will be comparing Delaney's play to the other dramatists of the 1950s, I also will be relying heavily on critical approaches to theatre history.

### 1.1 The 1950s and the New Wave of English Dramatists

The 1950s was a decade of change in British drama, as that was when a new kind of play for new kinds of audiences emerged. This change is said to have begun in 1956, the year when John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger* first appeared, radicalising British theatre overnight. *Look Back in Anger* was an onslaught against the Establishment, and Jimmie Porter, the frustrated and malcontent protagonist of the play, attacks everything and everyone representing that Establishment, including his wife, Allison, whose upper-class family represents the old class system that the working-class Jimmie so despises. In present-day criticism, Osborne's play may not be regarded as quite the masterpiece it once was thought to be. However, that is not to say that *Look Back in Anger* was not the seminal

play of the era, and although today its merits may be debated, it does not change the fact that it changed the entire drama scene. As Kenneth Allsop points out, a generation of writers were labelled as “Angry young men” following the success of Osborne’s play.<sup>1</sup> These included – in addition to Osborne – novelists and dramatists such as Kingsley Amis, Colin Wilson, John Wain, Alan Sillitoe, John Arden, Harold Pinter and Arnold Wesker. However, Stephen Lacey points out that the “Angry young men” were hardly a unified group of writers and dramatists, and claims that in fact they had very little in common. Lacey attributes this labelling to the influence of the media, and points out that the “Angry young men” were actually the first literary and dramatic phenomenon to become a major media event.<sup>2</sup>

Whether this journalistic label “Angry young men” or – in Shelagh Delaney’s case – “Angry young women” is fitting or not, the late 1950s did bring with it the emergence of the “New Wave” of young British dramatists, who were revolutionary in their dealing with working-class characters and themes. As Lacey points out, one of their central aims was to “extend the range of British social experience – particularly class experience – represented in the drama”.<sup>3</sup> That these New Wave playwrights were considered to be angry is probably due to the fact that they were openly and intensely anti-Establishment, and criticised the stagnation of society and the limited attitudes of their contemporaries, instead trying to depict the dislocation and the loss of identity that seemed to exist in post-World War II Britain. As Allsop points out, the purpose of this movement was “not so much to rebel against the old order of authority and standards, but to refuse to vote for it”.<sup>4</sup> Shelagh Delaney is associated with this group of young playwrights, although there is less anger in

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<sup>1</sup> Allsop, K. *The Angry Decade*. London: Peter Owen Limited, 1958, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> Lacey, S. *British Realist Theatre. The New Wave in Its Context 1956-1965*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 17

<sup>3</sup> Lacey, p. 70

<sup>4</sup> Allsop, p. 9

*A Taste of Honey* compared to the plays of her male contemporaries. However, perhaps due to her age and gender, and the themes she presented, Delaney's drama was considered to be quite controversial, making *A Taste of Honey* one of the seminal plays produced by the New Wave.

In general, post-war theatre seemed to concentrate mainly on individuals and personal relationships, with the themes of individuality, family and a sense of futility in the foreground.<sup>5</sup> Cascoigne argues that the New Wave of British playwrights adopted this theme, with one exception. In their plays personal relationships are not the highest value in life, they are the only value left, the only protection against the madness of the outside world.<sup>6</sup> For example, whereas many of the plays of Samuel Beckett, one of the major dramatists of the 1950s, deal with larger questions such as the meaning of life and the human condition, the New Wave does not contemplate such universal questions nor does it offer any wide-reaching answers. This is not to say that these plays focused simply on personal experience, since The New Wave dramatists were attempting to subvert the traditional rhetoric of the Establishment by re-examining such themes as class, race, gender and sexuality, and bringing marginalised people into the foreground. They aspired to describe the society from the inside, sharing all its anxieties and frustrations. However, Lacey argues that the New Wave was not self-consciously political in the sense that, for instance, the British socialist theatre of the 1970s was political, and points out that although the New Wave was opposed to the Establishment, the political values underpinning the opposition were not always consistent.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Cascoigne, B. *Twentieth-Century Drama*. London: Hutchinson, 1962, p. 48-55

<sup>6</sup> Cascoigne, p. 48-55

<sup>7</sup> Lacey, p. 4 and 34

## 1.2 Shelagh Delaney and *A Taste of Honey*

Shelagh Delaney, born 1939 in Salford, Lancashire, was only eighteen when she wrote her first play, *A Taste of Honey*, and it was performed for the first time in 1958. Although other women dramatists did exist in the late 1950s, Delaney seems to have been the only one to receive serious critical attention, although that attention was often very limited. One of the reasons for choosing this particular work as the object of my thesis is the fact that whereas many of the male dramatists of the era have been analysed extensively, Delaney – like her contemporary female dramatists such as Enid Bagnold and Ann Jellicoe – has been mostly ignored. Also, it seems that in the 1960s and 1970s critics analysing Delaney’s work concentrated mainly on the writer’s gender and age, and often ignored the content of the plays. John Russell Taylor even argued that there are no themes that you can isolate and study outside the dramatic context in *A Taste of Honey*<sup>8</sup>, meaning that the text itself is not strong enough to convey a message without the input of actors, a director and the stage. Although contemporary critics have had more luck in finding something to analyse, these analyses seem to be quite fragmented, and there exists no previous extensive study concentrating on this particular play. As Edward J. Esche points out, despite its success on stage, in film and on the page, *A Taste of Honey* has not received much serious academic attention “as a cultural product in its own right which is usually accorded to similar works of such initial and sustained success”.<sup>9</sup>

British drama in the 1950s was a male-dominated world, and *A Taste of Honey* is one of the few plays to explore women’s concerns from women’s point of view. Whereas in the plays of male writers male characters dominate and control the dramatic structure, and

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor, J.R. *Anger and After*. London: Methuen, 1962, p. 110

<sup>9</sup> Esche, E.J. “Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* as Serious Text: A Semiotic Reading”. *The Death of the Playwright? Modern British Drama and Literary Theory*. Ed. A. Page. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992, p. 67-68.



women often function as objects whose only role is to affirm male identity, in *A Taste of Honey* the gender dynamic is notably female, and women are at the centre of the play.<sup>10</sup>

Women function as subjects, and they have power to choose. Delaney is also quite controversial in her choice of themes such as motherhood, homosexuality and ethnic background, and in many ways she presents ideas that were highly unconventional at the time, and are discussed intensely even today. In that sense, Delaney and *A Taste of Honey* are still very topical and deserve to be studied.

Delaney has revealed that she intended *A Taste of Honey* to be a novel, but eventually felt that it would work better as a play. In an interview with Laurence Kitchin, she stressed the need to create a new kind of a play, one which depicts the real lives of working-class people instead of the stereotypical view that had been so prominent in British drama of the 1950s: “I had strong ideas about what I wanted to see in the theatre. We used to object to plays where factory workers come cap in hand and call the boss ‘Sir’. Usually North Country people are shown as gormless, whereas in actual fact they are very alive and cynical”.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps Delaney’s own attitude towards the theatre world of the time is best summed up in a reply by Helen, one of the characters of *A Taste of Honey*, when she is questioned about not going to the movies anymore: “I used to but the cinema has become more and more like the theatre, it’s all mauling and muttering, can’t hear what they’re saying half the time and when you do it’s not worth listening to” (27).<sup>12</sup> *A Taste of Honey* was Delaney’s way of creating something worth reading and listening to.

*A Taste of Honey* does not really have a plot, and not much happens during the play. The storyline is concerned mainly with personal relationships. As Lacey points out, there

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<sup>10</sup> Wandor, M: *Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender*. London: Routledge, 2001, p. 93

<sup>11</sup> Kitchin, Laurence. *Mid-Century Drama*. London: Faber, 1962, p. 168

<sup>12</sup> Delaney, S. *A Taste of Honey*. London: Methuen, 1982. All future references to this play within this thesis are to this edition, page number will be given in brackets.

are no direct references to the wider social world in *A Taste of Honey*, nor does it express any particular opinions on that world<sup>13</sup>, and thus the play is not overtly political but rather moves on a more personal level, although still dealing with many rather controversial themes. Some of the plays of the 1950s, mainly those of Shelagh Delaney and Arnold Wesker, were labelled as “kitchen-sink drama”, referring to their domestic setting which brought the previously invisible world of domestic work to centre stage.<sup>14</sup> *A Taste of Honey* has also received this label, though in fact not much domestic action takes place inside this domestic world.

The play tells the story of a young girl named Jo who lives with her mother Helen, a promiscuous woman constantly moving from one place to another. Jo has an affair with a black sailor, Jimmie, who then leaves her pregnant, and eventually Jo is left alone as Helen gets married to Peter and moves away. Geof, a homosexual art student, moves in with Jo, and takes care of her while she is pregnant. The whole play revolves around the relationships between this mixture of people, concentrating on the relationship between Jo and Helen. Thus, motherhood becomes one of the major themes in the play. Helen is not a particularly affectionate mother, and similarly Jo does not want to become a mother, but sees motherhood as a trapping role. With the male characters, Delaney also introduces the themes of ethnic background and sexuality that intertwine with the question of family.

Delaney also concentrated on the topic of family in her second play, *The Lion in Love* (1960). In this play she depicts the effects of an unhappy marriage on the family unit, and explores why people stay trapped in a marriage that makes them miserable. *The Lion in Love* was more conventional than *A Taste of Honey* and not quite so shocking, and perhaps this is why it did not achieve similar success. What makes *A Taste of Honey* quite radical is the way in which Delaney breaks all sorts of social, sexual and racial taboos, and reinvents

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<sup>13</sup> Lacey, p. 93

<sup>14</sup> Wandor, p. 41

the institution of family. The 1950s was the golden era of the nuclear family, an ideal which does not exist in this play. Jo and Helen form a fatherless family where motherhood is something that is thrust upon women whether or not they are willing to accept it. Jo and Geof, on the other hand, create a completely unconventional family, an asexual family, which does not include sexual activity. And the fact that Jo's baby will be partly black also questions the institution of family, and brings the question of race to the foreground. Thus, since family seems to be at the heart of *A Taste of Honey*, I will concentrate on that theme.

## 2. Theoretical Background

The starting point of my thesis will be Antonio Gramsci's idea of hegemony, the cultural/ideological leadership and superiority of one ideology, a state where certain cultural forms are dominant. Gramsci defines hegemony as "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group".<sup>15</sup> Joseph V. Femia describes Gramsci's hegemony as social control "which refers to an order in which common social-moral language is spoken, in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behaviour".<sup>16</sup> In other words, hegemony is not necessarily something coerced or forced, but rather something that is reached by consent, by general acceptance of and agreement to the hegemonic order. This can also be seen when applied to the institution of family, especially when considering the way in which the nuclear family is taken for granted as a natural thing.

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<sup>15</sup> Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 12

<sup>16</sup> Femia, J.V. *Gramsci's Political Thought. Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 24

Moreover, Femia points out that this kind of a consensus on the dominant ideology is so internalised and institutionalised in modern societies that a direct attack against it will only fail, and what is needed is a more subtle mental transformation of the way people interpret the world.<sup>17</sup> My attempt in this thesis is to show how Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* partakes in this kind of a subtle resistance to the hegemonic view of family, and how this can be seen to also affect the construction of nationhood, as these two institutions are closely connected. Thus, in this theory section I will attempt to show what the prevalent situation concerning family was and is, and how the themes presented in *A Taste of Honey* question this hegemonic view of the family. I will also establish a link between family and nation, and show how these two institutions are intertwined.

## 2.1 The Family

Anthony D. Smith argues that a nation can be seen as a fictive "super-family", and that the concepts of family and nation are often linked together.<sup>18</sup> This metaphor of family is an essential part of the construction of nations, and as Smiths writes, "even where local allegiances are tolerated and real families given their due the language and symbolism of the nation asserts its priority and, through the state and citizenship, exerts its legal and bureaucratic pressures on the family, using similar kinship metaphors to justify itself".<sup>19</sup> It is no wonder, then, that the state of family can be seen as indicative of the state of the nation. Thus, destabilising the concept of family can lead to uncertainties when considering the structure of the nation itself.

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<sup>17</sup> Femia, p. 51-52

<sup>18</sup> Smith, A.D. *National Identity*. London: Penguin Group, 1991, p. 22

<sup>19</sup> Smith, p. 79

The institution of family has a central role in the plays of the New Wave in the 1950s and 1960s, and the plays of the era offer us different viewpoints on family life. As

Michelene Wandor writes:

The model of the family, real and symbolic, is central to all the plays of these two decades. All the relationships and actions in the plays take place within the conventions of a “family” model (parent couple and child/children, however distorted), and so inevitably the plays become about what has happened or is perceived as happening to the family itself – real and symbolic. The limitations on what is permitted within family life, the codes of repression, the imagery, are themselves represented in ways indirectly produced by censorship.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, censorship did have an effect on the way in which these plays reflected the concerns surrounding the concept of family, and certain themes, such as homosexuality, were banned from discussion. For instance, homosexual acts were criminal offences, and it was only in 1967 that the Sexual Offences Act ended the persecution of homosexuals.<sup>21</sup>

However, as Wandor points out, in spite of censorial constraints, Delaney is one of the few playwrights in this era who does offer the possibility of an alternative family, a family which breaks social conventions.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in order to establish what the hegemonic view of the family was, in the following chapters I will discuss how the institution of family has been traditionally explained and justified, and what kind of family structures and values were considered to be morally superior in Britain in the 1950s.

### 2.1.1 The Concept of Family

The concept of family as a universal unit for the nurturing of children has traditionally been the dominant view in the Western world. The family has been seen as comprising

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<sup>20</sup> Wandor, p. 91

<sup>21</sup> Marwick, A. *British Society Since 1945*. London: Penguin, 1982, p. 152

<sup>22</sup> Wandor, p. 92

three features.<sup>23</sup> Firstly, families have clear boundaries to distinguish outsiders from insiders. Secondly, families have a definite physical place where the nurturing of children takes place, and thirdly, family members share a particular set of emotions, that of family love and affection for each other. Providing nurturance is seen as the primary function of families, and therefore this concept of the family has endured. However, this concept has a crucial flaw, as Collier et al point out: “Because a social institution is observed to perform a necessary function does not mean either that the function would not be performed if the institution did not exist or that the function is responsible for the existence of the institution”.<sup>24</sup> In other words, even though families perform the necessary function of nurturance in society, it does not mean that without families this nurturance would not be performed, or that nurturance justifies the existence of families. The idea that this concept of family is universal, natural and neutral has been criticised by contemporary critics from various fields.

Although this conventional concept of family has been challenged, many of these critics still adhere to the basic assumptions included in the traditional view. For instance, as Collier et al point out, some anthropologists have argued that the mother-child unit is the basic social unit, and that removing the father from the equation would not disturb the function of nurturing children.<sup>25</sup> However, such critics have neither questioned nor modified the basic features of the traditional concept. According to Collier et al, not all languages in the world even have a word for this concept of the family, and the basic social unit of the Zinacantecos tribe of Southern Mexico, for example, is a “house” that can

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<sup>23</sup> Collier, J., Rosaldo, M.Z., Yanagisako, S. “Is There a Family? New Anthropological Views”. *Rethinking the Family*. Ed. B. Thorne and M. Yalom. New York: Longman, 1992, p. 33

<sup>24</sup> Collier et al, p. 34

<sup>25</sup> Collier et al, p. 34

consist of one to twenty people.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, not all families have a place, and family members do not always love one another, nor do all cultures even recognise the concept of the self-sacrificing love of a mother. Thus, since Western nuclear families are not universal, there is a need to re-examine the biases that have led to this particular construction of the concept of family. This is what Delaney is doing in *A Taste of Honey*. In the family she presents there is very little nurturance, the family boundaries are not clearly defined, the location of home changes constantly, and family affection is questionable.

In fact, family is a moral and ideological unit closely linked to the social environment. As Collier et al argue, “The Family as we know it is not a ‘natural’ group created by the claims of ‘blood’ but a sphere of human relationships shaped by a state that recognizes Families as units that hold property, provide for care and welfare, and attend particularly to the young – a sphere conceptualized as a realm of love and intimacy *in opposition* to the more ‘impersonal’ norms that dominate modern economics and politics”.<sup>27</sup> Some critics also argue that the traditional institution of family is actually a servant of capitalism, with capitalism’s dependence on this basic unit of society for providing domestic labour.<sup>28</sup> Collier et al point out that the concept of family is not unchanging, and that since the Western definition of the family is closely related to the division between ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres, in cultures where this division does not exist, families are also structured differently.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the way we perceive families today is a direct consequence of the social world that we inhabit.

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<sup>26</sup> Collier et al, p. 35

<sup>27</sup> Collier et al, p. 40

<sup>28</sup> Humphries, J. “The Working-Class Family: A Marxist Perspective”. *The Family in Political Thought*. Ed. J.B. Elshtain. Brighton: Harvest Press, 1982, p. 198

<sup>29</sup> Collier et al, p. 39-41

### 2.1.2 The 1950s and the Nuclear Family in Britain

After World War II the institution of family was seen as central in the rebuilding of the nation both physically and ideologically, which led to the need to restore family life disrupted by war. As Estella Tincknell writes:

In particular, the 1950s have been central to the way in which the family has been imagined and represented, both directly, in political discourse, and through more indirect but no less powerful cultural mediation. Certainly, the idea that this decade was a golden age of family values, the high point of bourgeois norms and certainties around sexuality, gender and the relationship between adults and children, persists in shaping contemporary assumptions and subjectivities.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, the period after the war was a time of redefining the institution of family, creating a definition that has lasted to the present day. The move was from an extended family, where different generations cohabited, towards the nuclear family of two parents and their children. The central idea behind the nuclear family is the division of roles of the family members.<sup>31</sup> This sexual division of labour meant that women were confined to the domestic setting whereas men inhabited the public sphere, providing for the family by working outside the home. In the eyes of the Establishment, this conventional family structure was morally preferable to other structures and even today, the term “family” usually refers to this idea of a nuclear family.

Although this concept of family was seen as natural, it was also considered to be very vulnerable, especially to perceived deviant sexuality.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the borders of the family were closely monitored in the post-war years, and any conditions that were seen to threaten the family were controlled. Family was seen as the cornerstone of culture and nation, and

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<sup>30</sup> Tincknell, E. *Mediating the Family: Gender, Culture and Representation*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2005, p. 5

<sup>31</sup> Oakley, A. “Conventional Families”. *Families in Britain*. Ed. R.N. Rapoport, M.P. Fogarty and R. Rapoport. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, p. 125

<sup>32</sup> Dollimore, J. “The Challenge of Sexuality”. *Society and Literature 1945-1970*. Ed. A. Sinfield. London: Methuen, 1983, p. 55



the social, economic and ideological changes it faced in the post-war years caused considerable concern.<sup>33</sup> Although the notion of the patriarchal nuclear family was strongly enforced by the Establishment, the real lives within families did not necessarily match the ideal.

As mentioned earlier, World War II had disrupted family life in Britain. However, although the divorce levels were higher than before, marriage was still popular, and even of those divorced three quarters were remarried.<sup>34</sup> For example, the marriage rate for single women over the age of sixteen was approximately 82 per cent in the five-year period between 1956 and 1960.<sup>35</sup> In addition, out of all British children born in 1955, only five per cent were born outside marriage.<sup>36</sup> In comparison, this number was approximately 12 per cent in the 1980s and had reached 42 per cent in 2004.<sup>37</sup> As Tincknell points out, marriage and reproduction remained inseparable in the post-war reconfiguration of gender roles and representations.<sup>38</sup> Bearing an illegitimate child like Jo would have been highly condemnable, and the only suitable role for a married woman would be seen as domesticated maternity, which is also not the case in *A Taste of Honey*.

## 2.2. Otherness

In the previous chapters I have attempted to describe the hegemonic view of family, especially the view which dominated in the 1950s. In the following chapters I will turn my attention to the themes through which *A Taste of Honey* can be seen to destabilise this dominant view. *A Taste of Honey* contains many different types of Other-positions that

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<sup>33</sup> Dollimore, p. 60-61

<sup>34</sup> Marwick, p. 64

<sup>35</sup> "Marriage Rates". National Statistics.

<sup>36</sup> Marwick, p. 64

<sup>37</sup> "Births out of wedlock 'pass 40%". BBC News.

<sup>38</sup> Tincknell, p. 29

ultimately affect the institution of family. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term “other” as something opposed to self: “That which is the counterpart or converse of something specified or implied; (*spec.* in structuralist and poststructuralist critical and psychoanalytic thought) that which is not the self or subject; that which lies outside or is excluded from the group with which one identifies oneself”.<sup>39</sup> The themes of motherhood, sexuality and ethnic background provide Other-positions to the dominating patriarchal concept of the nuclear family.

It should be noted that *A Taste of Honey* includes various kinds of Otherness that can also be seen to contribute to the destabilising of the traditional family structure. It was written at a time when representations of class within drama were in the foreground and, as mentioned previously, the New Wave playwrights dealt with working-class themes and characters, presenting a working-class experience that had previously been excluded from the stage. Similarly, Jo and Geof are artists, and the play contains plenty of music and singing, which can be seen as methods of empowerment for this marginalised group. Furthermore, the play concentrates on young people, which had also been very rare in pre-New Wave drama. As Jozefina Komporaly points out, apart from Jo, “there have been hardly any landmark young female heroines in plays by post-war British women.”<sup>40</sup> Jo also claims that she and Geof are “communists”, again setting them apart from the dominant capitalist society represented by Peter, Helen’s husband, who attaches great importance to money and the appearance of wealth. In addition, the characters of *A Taste of Honey* are marginalised by their northerness, as the play takes place in Salford, northern England. The North is very strongly associated with working-classness, and therefore connotes a

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<sup>39</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. Available from <<http://www.oed.com/>>

<sup>40</sup> Komporaly, J. *Staging Motherhood. British Women Playwrights, 1956 to the Present*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 103

particular type of social and cultural landscape.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the characters of *A Taste of Honey* are marginalised in more ways than one, and motherhood, sexuality and ethnic background are not the only Other-positions that exist within the play. However, in this thesis I will mainly concentrate on these three major themes, since they seem to be most significant.

### 2.2.1 Women and Motherhood

Women play a crucial role in the reproduction of the nation, although they have usually been excluded from the discussion of this process due to the fact that they are located outside the public political arena in which the reproduction of the nation is seen to happen. As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, it is women who take part in the reproduction of nations biologically, culturally and symbolically.<sup>42</sup> Regarding biological reproduction, Yuval-Davis points out that “often the pressures on women to have or not have children relate to them not as individuals, workers and/or wives, but as members of specific national collectives”<sup>43</sup> since one usually joins a nation by being born into it. It is women who give birth to the nation, and this biological reproductive capability has been controlled in order to assure that no unwanted elements manage to infiltrate the nation. In addition to biological reproduction, women are also seen as guarding the culture of the nation by socialising their children, as well as representing the nation by being “symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively”.<sup>44</sup> However, despite this cultural and symbolic role, women’s position within a nation was often quite ambivalent as they were left outside the political discourse of nationhood. Thus, women

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<sup>41</sup> Lacey, p. 78

<sup>42</sup> Yuval-Davis, N. *Gender & Nation*. London: Sage, 1997, p. 2

<sup>43</sup> Yuval-Davis, p. 22

<sup>44</sup> Yuval-Davis, p. 116

functioned as objects rather than subjects, and were the “Other” to the male “Self”, when all the while it was men who defined the way in which women should represent the nation.

Men have also had a strategic role in defining motherhood. Adrienne Rich points out that women have written very little on the subject of motherhood, and through the ages many of the images of motherhood have been filtered through a male consciousness.<sup>45</sup> This male consciousness provided theories, ideals and stereotypes that were taken for granted, as a description of what it means to be a woman and a mother. All in all, the institution of motherhood is not a natural thing, but rather it has a history written by and for men and an ideology stemming from patriarchy. As Rich argues, the institution of motherhood is very much patriarchal in its origins and had very little to do with the actual experiences of women: patriarchy seems to require women to sacrifice themselves and their own intelligence and self-awareness in order to give birth to children.<sup>46</sup> This was seen as natural for women. However, the patriarchal viewpoint only accepted this if the offspring was somehow legitimised; having a father who legally controls the mother. Without the father’s name, the child was illegitimate. As Rich writes: “Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood and heterosexuality in their institutional forms; therefore they have to be treated as axioms, as ‘nature’ itself, not open to question except where, from time to time and place to place, ‘alternate life-styles’ for certain individuals are tolerated”.<sup>47</sup> This domination of women by men has been at the heart of the traditional institution of motherhood in the Western world.

An enduring theme in the discussion around motherhood has been the responsibility of a mother for the outcome of her mothering. Mothers are seen as all-powerful, which

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<sup>45</sup> Rich, A. *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986, p. 61-62

<sup>46</sup> Rich, p. 41-43

<sup>47</sup> Rich, p. 43

paradoxically leads to both idealising and blaming them.<sup>48</sup> On the one hand, there exists the ideal of a perfect mother and her self-sacrificing love for her children, children whose needs are never unrealistic or unreasonable: if only mothers would devote their lives completely to the child. And where some mothers fail in this perfection, the feminist view seems to be that these women are simply victims of patriarchal constraints, a removal of which would solve the problem.<sup>49</sup> In other words, every mother can be perfect if she chooses to. On the other hand, mothers are seen to be completely responsible for their children's lives, even if their mothering is controlled and affected by the male-dominated society. Thus, this view assumes that mothers have total control and power in the mothering process, and that their actions determine the whole spectrum of their children's lives. This unrealistic expectation of perfection gives rise to the way in which mothers are blamed for the failings of their children. This idealisation of women as all-powerful and omnipotent denies them the right to selfhood.<sup>50</sup> *A Taste of Honey*, by contrast, allows women to be human and not completely defined by motherhood.

A woman's value in society is thus closely linked with her ability and willingness to bear children, and women who refuse to become mothers are seen not only as emotionally unnatural but also dangerous in their unwillingness to continue the species and to accept the pain that follows.<sup>51</sup> Women are thus in a conflicting position: there exists a set of rules and norms of what it is to be a woman and a mother, but women themselves have had very little influence over the construction of these norms, one of which is the naturalness of motherhood. As Rich points out, the idea of women having a final say as to how their

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<sup>48</sup> Chodorow, N. & Contratto, S. "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother". *Rethinking the Family*. Ed. B. Thorne and M. Yalom. New York: Longman, 1982, p. 55-67

<sup>49</sup> Chodorow & Contratto, p. 55-67

<sup>50</sup> Chodorow & Contratto, p. 55-67

<sup>51</sup> Rich, p. 169

bodies are used has roused intense fear<sup>52</sup>, as that could shake the entire foundation of how womanhood is defined, and in so doing would have far-reaching consequences in the construction of national identity as well.

### 2.2.2 Sexuality

The link between sexuality, especially homosexuality, and nation may not be as obvious as in the case of motherhood and ethnic background, but the link between homosexuality and the ideology of family is clearer, connecting homosexuality to the national arena as well. Here again the idea of naturalness plays an important part, as heterosexuality is seen as something natural whereas homosexuality is deemed unnatural. As Dollimore writes:

Conservative arguments for the control of sexuality typically anchor notions of a correct social order in notions of a correct natural order. Historically this has been one of the most important mechanisms of ideological control: by being designated as “natural”, a particular social order or practice is legitimized, since anything natural must surely be unalterable and therefore beyond question. Conversely, whatever is thought to contravene that order or practice is stigmatized as “unnatural”, and outlawed.<sup>53</sup>

In the post-war years, homosexuality was seen as something unnatural and completely alien to normal people, and at the same time the idea that homosexuality could corrupt these normal beings into something monstrous was prevalent<sup>54</sup>, and thus both the practice and representation of such “monstrosity” was strictly controlled.<sup>55</sup>

Family is the institution which played an important part in the construction of gender identity and gender-specific behaviour through its sexual division of labour. This is where

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<sup>52</sup> Rich, p. 30

<sup>53</sup> Dollimore, p. 54

<sup>54</sup> Dollimore, p. 55

<sup>55</sup> For example, in the post-war United States, conservative Senator Joseph McCarthy attacked both Communists and homosexuals arguing that their immoral, perverse and subversive behaviour was risking national security, thus legitimising extensive harassment and persecution of both of these groups. See Cuordileone 2000, p. 532-533

the separation between biological sex and organisation of sex come to the fore. The gender system is not the natural outcome of biological difference, but rather a social construct. Sex differences are created and accentuated in order to emphasise the differences between the different sexes, thus enabling the division of labour according to sex.<sup>56</sup> That said, this idea of gender being something socially constructed and of masculinity and femininity being relational was not the prevalent theoretical perspective in the 1950s, and the idea that a homosexual man could function as a caregiver within a family would have been quite radical, considering the fact that one of the functions of a family is the creation of sexual identity. In the 1950s, the “corruptive power” of homosexuality could not be accepted within the conventional institution of family.

This demonization and exclusion of homosexuality was also present in representations, and post-war drama echoed the prevailing attitudes towards homosexuality. Since the depiction of homosexuality was prohibited by censorship, ending only in 1968, dramatists and directors had to signify the homosexual character by using the typical stereotype of making him effeminate, which is also the case with Delaney. Thus, homosexual characters would stand out by the way their appearance, manner and behaviour differed from the traditional view of masculinity. According to De Jongh, in the period before World War II, homosexuals in drama were mainly depicted as being archetypically evil or dangerous, and suffering from this deviancy.<sup>57</sup> It was only in 1958 that this stereotypical depiction was replaced by the New Wave dramatists, who for the first time began to break away from the archetypal view, and instead depicted homosexuals as pathetic or unfortunate, rather than dangerous.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Flax, J. “The Family in Contemporary Feminist Thought: A Critical Review”. *The Family in Political Thought*. Ed. J.B. Elshtain. Brighton: Harvest Press, 1982, p. 239-242

<sup>57</sup> De Jongh, N. *Not in front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 3-4

<sup>58</sup> De Jongh, p. 5

As De Jongh points out, the depiction of homosexuality in British drama was completely prohibited by censorship, until in 1958 this absolute ban was somewhat relaxed to allow some serious discussion of homosexuality.<sup>59</sup> Although references to homosexuality were now allowed on stage, demonstrations of love or other such “offensive acts” were still outlawed. However, not many dramatists took advantage of this new opportunity and even if they did, not many producers dared to challenge the sexual status quo, not to mention the fact that it was only after 1968 that dramatists were able to freely discuss matters of homosexuality.<sup>60</sup> The depiction of homosexuality was thus only slightly refined by this 1958 relaxation of the ban, but it did bring out a compassionate view of homosexuals, depicting them as pathetic rather than a threat, as objects of contempt and pity. *A Taste of Honey* is again a forerunner in this respect, and as 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”.<sup>61</sup>

### 2.2.3 Ethnic Background

As Anthony D. Smith points out, a nation is first and foremost a community that shares a common history and ancestry. It is this concept of unity that is at the heart of any nation. Even though most modern states are ethnically and culturally heterogeneous, there still exists a myth of complete unity and homogeneity.<sup>62</sup> In his famous lecture delivered in 1882, Ernest Renan warns against confusing race with nation, and points out that race – ambiguous as the term itself is – has not been the determining factor in the constitution of modern nations, and that from a historical perspective even the British Isles are actually

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<sup>59</sup> De Jongh, p. 89-90

<sup>60</sup> De Jongh, p. 90

<sup>61</sup> De Jongh, p. 93

<sup>62</sup> Smith, p. 146



ethnographically diverse, having both Celtic and Germanic ancestry.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, as James Snead argues, imperialism – the forceful unification of diverse nations under a single flag – requires selective assimilation instead of aggressive exclusion and, thus, the wider the British Empire expanded, the less racially pure it became.<sup>64</sup>

That being said, to many people nation still equalled racial unity, and even though in the 1950s England was becoming a multicultural nation, to most people born before 1950 England was an exclusively white country, and although its colour was diversifying, this development was seen as a threat to national culture and identity.<sup>65</sup> Peter Fryer argues that half of the white population in Britain had never even met a black person, and yet were very prejudiced against them, voicing many popular stereotypes: black men as, for example, uncivilised, inferior, illiterate and less sexually inhibited.<sup>66</sup> Racism manifested itself in many forms, from silent resistance and discrimination to violent anti-black riots.<sup>67</sup> For instance, in 1958 violent race riots broke out in Notting Hill, London.<sup>68</sup> Although the 1948 Nationality Act stated that any citizen of Britain's colonies was granted United Kingdom citizenship<sup>69</sup>, this was quite a hostile environment for any black person to enter. Similarly, prejudice was not only confined to people of different skin colour but, for instance, Irish immigrants were also seen as a threat to homogeneity, and represented as models of immorality.

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<sup>63</sup> Renan, E. "What is a Nation?". *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Bhabha, H.K. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 13-14

<sup>64</sup> Snead, J. "European Pedigrees/African Contagions: Nationality, Narrative, and Communitarity in Tutuola, Achebe and Reed". *Nation and Narration*. Ed. H.K. Bhabha. London: Routledge, 1990, p. 233

<sup>65</sup> Colls, R. *Identity of England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 143

<sup>66</sup> Fryer, P. *Staying Power. The History of Black People in Britain*. London: Pluto Press, 1984, p. 374

<sup>67</sup> Fryer, p. 378

<sup>68</sup> Marwick, p. 167

<sup>69</sup> Marwick, p. 373

When ethnicity is added to this tendency towards uniformity, the idea of miscegenation – the interbreeding or sexual union of members of different ethnic groups – becomes of great concern in the nationalistic discourse.<sup>70</sup> This is one of the reasons why the control of procreation has been central in the nationalistic agenda. As Chambers points out, “the family plays a central role in the expression of the core values of civil society and as such has become a key site of struggle over cultural values surrounding social hierarchies of class, race, nationhood”.<sup>71</sup> Interracial love and family relations have been highly controversial subjects, often eliciting feelings of condemnation or at least of discomfort. Even in contemporary society inter-ethnic relationships are quite rare, and in 2001 only two per cent of all the marriages in Britain were inter-ethnic.<sup>72</sup> And, as Werner Sollors points out, that which is socially disapproved in real life is often also censored, repressed and rejected in representations.<sup>73</sup> Delaney is thus quite radical in portraying an inter-ethnic relationship in the 1950s without condemnation, and also showing that the English family is far from being homogenous.

### 3. Motherhood

Motherhood is definitely one of the central themes of *A Taste of Honey*, and Delaney approaches this topic from a specifically female point of view, unlike many of the male playwrights of the era, whose starting point on the subject of family was male identity and its construction. As Jozefina Komporaly points out, playwrights such as Wesker, Arden and Pinter “stressed the necessary emotional distance between their heroes and the

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<sup>70</sup> Yuval-Davis, p. 22-23

<sup>71</sup> Chambers, D. *Representing the Family*. London: Sage Publications, 2001, p. 165

<sup>72</sup> “Inter-Ethnic Marriages”. National Statistics.

<sup>73</sup> Sollors, W. *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both. Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 4

maternal figure<sup>74</sup>, which lead to the diminishing of the female influence in these plays.

Delaney, on the other hand, leaves her male characters in the background, and concentrates on the female point of view, and the female construction of identity and self.

It is important to note that it was not only the world of theatre that was dominated by the masculine approach to motherhood, as Anne E. Kaplan writes:

It was not then so much that the mother had not received attention as that she had mainly been studied from an other's point of view; or represented as an (unquestionable) patriarchally constructed social function. Few scholars had been interested in understanding her positioning or her social role from inside the mother's discourse.<sup>75</sup>

Thus, motherhood had traditionally been defined from the outside, rather than from the inside, and, as Kaplan points out, it was only in the 1970s that the discourse of motherhood began to change.<sup>76</sup> However, Delaney, as well as some of her contemporary female dramatists, had a different view on this topic already in the 1950s. This naturally meant that their approach was rather controversial, as they dared to question many of the socially validated patriarchal structures.

*A Taste of Honey* revolves around quite a problematic mother-daughter relationship where it is sometimes difficult to determine which of the two behaves more like a mother and which like a child. Furthermore, both of the female characters in the play are or soon will be mothers, but instead of conforming to the conventional roles that women are expected to fulfil, they refuse to be defined by their motherhood. Thus, Delaney presents us with women who see motherhood as something unwanted and daunting, women who dare to question the traditional assumptions behind that institution. In addition, *A Taste of Honey* questions whether motherhood is something that is determined solely by biology and blood, or whether there might be other factors in determining who could and should

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<sup>74</sup> Komporaly, p. 27

<sup>75</sup> Kaplan, A.E. *Motherhood and Representation*. London: Routledge, 1992, p. 3

<sup>76</sup> Kaplan, p. 26

provide maternal nurturing. In the following chapters I examine how Delaney destabilises the institution of family by reassessing the institution of motherhood.

### 3.1 Mother-Daughter Relationship

Jo and Helen form a fatherless family of two women, moving from one place to another and thus having no permanent home. It is made clear from the beginning that Helen has not been the most loving and caring of mothers, but has been more interested in enjoying life than bringing up her daughter. Although Helen has been quite an unsatisfactory mother, she has had an enormous effect on Jo's personality. Jo feels rejected by her mother who, as Jo states, has never truly loved her: "She had so much love for everyone else, but none for me" (72). Thus, Jo has learned not to rely on her mother, and stemming from this mistrust she does not expect much from other people either. She wants to be independent from everyone, especially Helen, and even finds it hard to accept help from Geof, a homosexual student who moves in with Jo after Helen leaves to get married. No matter how much Jo wants to distance herself from her mother, she still constantly analyses her own life in comparison with that of Helen's, and every once in a while manages to bring her up in a conversation. Thus, even though Helen is not present at all times, she is still the most influential character in Jo's life.

Although Jo is greatly influenced by Helen, and Jo and Helen's relationship is not completely without affection, it is quite a stormy situation when they are together. Helen has not paid much attention to the upbringing of her daughter and, as Jo points out, since Helen has done nothing for her, why should she do anything for Helen: "Why are you so suddenly interested in me, anyway? You've never cared much before about what I was doing or what I was trying to do or the difference between them" (15). The relationship

between them is quite distant, and they seem to lack a common language and understanding. Most of the time their communication seems to be like a verbal fencing match between two quite outspoken women. Here is just one example of the type of discussion Jo and Helen often have:

Helen: You're a bit late coming home from school, aren't you?

Jo: I met a friend.

Helen: Well, he certainly knows how to put stars in your eyes.

Jo: What makes you think it's a he?

Helen: Well, I certainly hope it isn't a she who makes you walk around in this state.

Jo: He's a sailor.

Helen: I hope you exercised proper control over his nautical ardour. I've met a few sailors myself. (26-27)

Thus, any conversation between Jo and Helen ends up being a show of wits, and instead of actually communicating something they merely attempt to outwit each other. However, at the same time this can be seen as a means of empowerment: it is their way of making sure that they are heard, that as women they have a voice. They are definitely not afraid to put their point across.

Behind this taunting façade, they display some true feeling for one another, and even though Jo and Helen seem to use their words to inflict pain, they still have a deep connection. As Arthur K. Oberg points out, Jo and Helen are putting on a performance, and “behind their words we hear speech that attempts to evade, depersonalize, and disguise feelings and genuine concern for one another”.<sup>77</sup> This depersonalisation is evident in the third person address that both characters use quite regularly. For example Helen refers to Jo as “she” very often, even when in conversation with Jo, suddenly talking *about* her, not *with* her. Similarly, Jo often calls her mother by her Christian name, instead of using “mother”. Oberg argues that this general feeling of detachment is due to the surroundings in which Jo and Helen find themselves, surroundings in which there exists very little

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<sup>77</sup> Oberg, A.K. ”’A Taste of Honey’ and the Popular Play”. *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 7, 1966, p. 161

privacy and which makes it difficult to maintain one's own identity.<sup>78</sup> Jo and Helen have very little private space and are even sharing a bed. As Jo remarks at the beginning of the play, "What I wouldn't give for a room of my own!" (8). That is why they might feel the need to detach themselves from one another in order to be perceived as individuals.

Perhaps it is the fact that Jo has been neglected by her mother that has made her want to detach herself from Helen, and perhaps it is partly due to the living environment, but one thing that Jo is definitely adamant about is not becoming like her mother. This is an example of what Adrienne Rich calls "matrophobia"<sup>79</sup>, which means the fear of becoming like one's mother. In matrophobia the daughter wants to free herself from her mother, who has resigned herself to the generally accepted norms of womanhood, and who has taught her daughter to compromise her own self and succumb to forced social restrictions.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the daughter tries to avoid this same fate by distancing herself from her mother through hating her. However, in the case of *A Taste of Honey* this hate does not stem from too great a compromise on the mother's part, but rather from a lack thereof. Helen has definitely not succumbed to the idealistic image of a woman and a mother, and has never asked Jo to compromise either. Helen is quite realistic about her role as Jo's mother, and points out that she has never claimed to be a proper mother, so Jo should not reproach her for not behaving like one (35). It is this lack of commitment that Jo so despises in Helen, and she is determined not to turn out like her mother.

In other words, matrophobia is the result of a desire to become an individual free from the influence of the mother, with whom the daughter nonetheless identifies very strongly. As the daughter's personality and identity often seem quite blurred with their mother's,

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<sup>78</sup> Oberg, p. 163

<sup>79</sup> Rich, p. 235-236

<sup>80</sup> Rich, p. 235-236

matrophobia is a desperate attempt to make that distinction clear, once and for all.<sup>81</sup> This is certainly the case with Jo, who seems to resent any implication that she might resemble Helen in some sense. However, as Rich again argues, matrophobia is not only about hate, and although the daughter may claim to hate her mother, there can be an unconscious pull toward her, as if completely letting go of the mother might somehow lead to identifying with her.<sup>82</sup> There exists a need to keep an eye on the mother, so as not to accidentally turn into her. Thus, the daughter may claim to hate her mother, and still borrow her clothes, or her way of living may be the exact opposite of her mother's, so as to make sure she will not become like her mother. Likewise, despite the fact that Jo cannot seem to be able to accept any similarity between her and Helen, she is still quite dependent on her mother, and is often quite possessive of her, especially in relation to Peter, Helen's future husband. Jo even suddenly attacks Peter and demands that he leave her and Helen alone, and makes it clear that she is unwilling to accept him as a part of their lives. Behind Jo's indifference, there still exists a jealousy for her mother's attention and affection. As much as Jo keeps on talking about her uniqueness, she is still quite dependent on Helen in the construction of her identity.

There is also a clear rivalry between Jo and Helen, at least in Jo's mind. Jo questions Jimmie, her black boyfriend, who later leaves her pregnant, about whether he thinks that Helen is beautiful and whether he sees any resemblance between Jo and Helen. Similarly, Jo flirts with Peter, and asks him whether he finds her attractive (32). Jo does not want to be like Helen, but is unable to let go of her, and instead behaves in a possessive and competitive manner. Thus it becomes obvious that Jo's feelings toward her mother go far beyond that of hate, and the other aspects of matrophobia are clearly present in her. There are also other occasions that show how Jo is trying to mimic, or rather defeat, Helen. When

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<sup>81</sup> Rich, p. 235-236

<sup>82</sup> Rich, p. 235-236

Helen decides to get married to Peter, Jo accepts Jimmie's proposal. Although Jo seems to be aware of the fact that Jimmie is not the most reliable of husband candidates, and is quite clear about the future of their relationship, she still promises to marry him as if to prove something to Helen. Even Helen notices this: "I suppose just because I'm getting married you think you should." (41). But here Helen also shows rare compassion for Jo, and she points out that Jo is just a child and that she should learn from Helen's mistakes rather than repeat them (41). Ultimately, neither of them has much luck in their choice of partner.

In addition, as much as Jo would like to avoid the fate of becoming like Helen, she is already in a very similar situation: a soon-to-be single mother, pregnant with an illegitimate child, working odd jobs and living in squalor. Moreover, neither Helen nor Jo really thinks about the future or about the consequences of their actions. They both display signs of escapism, and there are times when they are either unwilling or incapable of facing reality. Helen uses drinking as a method of forgetting about real life: "Well, it's one way of passing time while I'm waiting for something to turn up" (8-9). Jo also tries to pretend that the outside world does not exist and hides inside her apartment without any real connection to anything or anyone. Although it is mentioned in the play that Jo is a gifted artist and that her drawings show potential, in the end she does not develop her talent.

Geof warns Jo that she is on her way to becoming everything she disdains: "If you don't watch it, you'll turn out exactly like her [Helen]... In some ways you are already, you know" (72). Geof proves to be quite a perceptive friend, although Jo is unwilling to accept his assessment of her situation. However, as Edward J. Esche points out, there seems to be a cyclical pattern to the action of the play.<sup>83</sup> Jo is following in the footsteps of Helen, and although much of the play they are living separate lives, there are clear parallels between them and their destinies. Esche argues that this pattern seems to be repetitive, but not only

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<sup>83</sup> Esche, p. 78



for Jo: “As she screams in the pain of labour, the process, the cycle of single mother trapped in poverty with its inherent possibility of neglect, may be starting all over again for the child about to be born”.<sup>84</sup> Jo’s baby could potentially start the cycle again.

As Rich argues, women who have not been mothered enough in their childhood may feel the need to deny that loss and vulnerability, and perhaps act as mothers to others, giving them what they themselves lacked. On the other hand, a “motherless” woman may also seek a mother all her life, even in men.<sup>85</sup> There exists the need to be mothered, in some cases by anyone. Jo seems to embody the latter description. Having not been loved by her own mother, she seeks mothering in others: first in Jimmie, her black boyfriend, and then in Geof, who replaces the role of Helen in Jo’s life. However, Geof seems to perform the role of mother much better than Helen, implying that biological motherhood is not necessarily the most nurturing of relationships.

### 3.2 Denial of Traditional Motherhood

One of the aspects of motherhood that again is seen as being natural is mother’s love for her children. The idea that giving birth to a child naturally entails attachment to the child has endured. However, as Sara Ruddick points out, the complexities of a mother’s love should not be belittled or denied: a mother may see pregnancy as an invasion of her body, or she might feel unprepared for the demands of motherhood.<sup>86</sup> These are ideas that were not acknowledged when *A Taste of Honey* was published, and the naturalness of mother’s love was seen as the cornerstone of family life. Ruddick argues that a mother “may

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<sup>84</sup> Esche, p. 78

<sup>85</sup> Rich, p. 243

<sup>86</sup> Ruddick, S. “Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth”. *Representations of Motherhood*. Ed. D. Bassin, M. Honey and M. Mahrer Kaplan. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994, p. 38

nonetheless claim pregnancy and birthgiving as an expression of herself, including her resentment, ambivalences, and fears, rather than as an alien condition or social expectation to which she submits".<sup>87</sup> This is what Jo is doing in her own way. She is afraid, unprepared and angry, but she is still determined to have the baby on her own terms. Delaney dares to question the naturalness of a mother's love and allows her female characters to have fears and doubts about becoming and being mothers.

One of the crucial elements of post-war discussion on the family was the demonisation of bad mothering in opposition to the canonisation of the good. It was especially working-class women who were labelled bad mothers. As Tincknell writes:

Crucially, while the theory of maternal deprivation was institutionalized into the common-sense of post-war health and education systems, like other regulatory discourses it was usually applied to the policing and supervision of working-class women and their children by largely middle-class health professionals, precisely because the unequal power relations between these two groups was already embedded in the system.<sup>88</sup>

In some sense, Delaney could be seen as contributing to this view by presenting rather unsatisfactory working-class motherhood, both in Helen's disregard towards Jo, and also in Jo's ambivalent attitude towards her unborn child. However, Delaney's approach to motherhood goes beyond what is "good" or "bad" mothering, and instead she playfully questions the entire notion of motherhood being a synonym for womanhood. Delaney presents women who are not willing to be defined simply in terms of motherhood, but who dare to be individuals and who are not willing to sacrifice their needs to satisfy those of the surrounding society. They dare to suggest that motherhood is not an alternative to individuality or sexuality. In conventional terms Helen might not be a "proper" mother, and due to her neglect Jo seems to be unable to attach emotionally to her unborn child.

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<sup>87</sup> Ruddick, p. 39

<sup>88</sup> Tincknell, p. 29

However, Delaney does not vilify Helen for neglecting Jo, but instead allows her the right to choose, the right to define what it means to be a mother on her own terms.

Helen is thus the main example of a woman who is not satisfied to be “just” a mother. For Helen, having Jo has not changed who she is and the way she wants to live her life, and she has been unwilling to compromise her own needs to satisfy those of Jo’s. As discussed in the previous chapter on motherhood, Helen has not been very attentive to Jo, and has neglected Jo’s needs in more ways than one. She has not provided Jo with a home, but has been moving from one place to the next, never settling down. Helen does not consider providing a home as being one of her duties: “Anyway, what’s wrong with this place? Everything in it’s falling apart, it’s true, and we’ve no heating – but there’s a lovely view of the gasworks, we share a bathroom with the community and this wallpaper’s contemporary. What else do you want?” (7). When Helen marries Peter, she leaves Jo behind, and does not take her to live with them in his new house, again depriving Jo of a home. In addition to not having a home, Helen has not provided much mental or emotional support for Jo. Instead, she is very frank about her lack of interest in her daughter. Helen does not remember what day Jo was born, and says she has done her best to forget that day. Helen even blames Jo for her divorce with her first husband (28), as if she herself were blameless for having an affair and becoming pregnant. It is Helen who best describes the thought that was quite a taboo at the time when she states that “bearing a child doesn’t place one under an obligation to it” (60). This is Helen’s way of defining motherhood, and no matter how unpopular her way might be she is satisfied with it.

*A Taste of Honey* seems to suggest that the traditional definition of motherhood is a sort of acting, as if there are certain tasks you can perform to be a proper mother, such as providing nurturance, money and home. However, it also questions who is to define what the essential features of proper motherhood are, and whether there even is such a thing as a

“proper mother”. This is the question that the play is asking: would Helen be a better mother if she, for instance, had given Jo a proper home? Occasionally, Helen feels that she should act more like a conventional mother, as when she finds out that Jo is pregnant, and comes to visit her:

Jo: It’s taken you a long time to come round to this, hasn’t it?

Helen: What?

Jo: The famous mother-love act.

Helen: I haven’t been able to sleep for thinking about you since he came round to our house.

Jo: And your sleep mustn’t be disturbed at any cost.

Helen: There’ll be money in the post for you every week from now on.

Jo: Until you forget.

Helen: I don’t forget things; It’s just that I can’t remember anything. I’m going to see you through this whether you like it or not. After all I am...

Jo: After all you are my mother! You’re a bit late remembering that, aren’t you? You walked through that door with that man and didn’t give me a second thought. (64)

However, as Delaney makes abundantly clear, this is just an act on Helen’s part, since she has merely come to visit and instead of staying with her daughter, Helen only offers her some money. At the end of this scene, Helen returns to her new home with Peter rather than staying with Jo. Thus, although Helen does occasionally recognise the socially acceptable features of motherhood, she is unwilling to play the part on those terms.

Although Delaney points out that motherhood does not come naturally to all, she also does not completely deny the mother’s power over her children or the connection mothers and daughters have, however faulty that connection might be. Jo claims that she is not affected by Helen at all, but she still feels that parents are to blame for their children turning out the way they do. She makes this remark a couple of times within the play when she comes across the neighbouring children playing in the background:

Jo: It’s their parents’ fault. There’s a little boy over there and his hair, honestly, it’s walking away. And his ears. Oh! He’s a real mess! He never goes to school. He just sits on that front doorstep all day. I think he’s a bit deficient. His mother ought not to be allowed.

Geof: Who?

Jo: His mother. Think of all the harm she does, having children. (54)

Here, in addition to making a social comment on the poor conditions that many working-class people found themselves living in and the effects of these circumstances, Jo is also talking about her own situation. Although Jo is trying to detach herself from Helen and affirm her individuality, she is still following in her footsteps, becoming just like Helen. Jo feels, at least subconsciously, that Helen is to blame for her situation, as this way she does not have to accept responsibility for her own destiny. However, after all they have gone through, Jo still wishes that Helen was home when she is about to give birth: “You know, I wish she was here all the same” (74). The bond of motherhood is still apparent, even when that bond is not based on nurturance or love.

Nurturance is thus one of the key themes of motherhood in *A Taste of Honey*. Helen has been unable to nurture Jo, and thus Jo is also ambivalent when it comes to taking care of her unborn child. As Jo states, “I don’t know much about love. I’ve never been too familiar with it. I suppose I must have loved him. They say love creates. And I’m certainly creating at the moment.” (49). One of the symbols of nurturance is the bulbs that at the beginning of the play Jo brings with her to the new flat in the hope that they will bloom. However, nurturance in this play seems to be doomed to failure, and as Jo herself remarks, “always before when I’ve tried to fix up a window box nothin’s ever grown in it” (11). Jo hides the bulbs under the sofa, and only discovers them at the end of the play, nine months later, when they have died. Yet another attempt to nurture and grow something has failed, echoing the failed mothering of Helen and overshadowing Jo’s future mothering. As Edward J. Esche argues, the bulbs symbolise both the chance for growth but also failure to achieve this growth: “The bulbs also take on further meanings of symbol when they are discovered by Geoff much later in the play, hidden under the sofa in the flat. At that point, they are dead. Quite clearly, they are symbols of, again, the potentiality of growth, and through growth, of the potentiality of beauty. The two properties work as reinforcements of

each other, and both indicate processes that end in exactly the same way: in failure and loss”.<sup>89</sup> The bulbs, like Jo’s emergent artistic aptitude, represent the potential for change, which ultimately ends the same way: Jo does not develop her talent, the bulbs do not grow, and Jo does not manage to escape the fate of her mother.

Thus, like Helen before her, Jo appears very conflicted about the child she is carrying. On the other hand, she seems indifferent about the child, not really thinking about her life after the child is born. She is in a state of denial about the changes the child will bring to her life, although Geof tries to encourage her to be prepared. Sometimes Jo shows that she does care more than she says, as when the baby kicks her, and she is amazed by that. However, she also states that she hates babies, and says she finds them revolting (55). She declares that she is not going to breastfeed: “I’m not having a little animal nibbling away at me, it’s cannibalistic. Like being eaten alive” (56). Her most violent outburst happens when Geof brings her a life-sized doll to practise on. Jo remarks that the doll has the wrong colour of skin, as the doll is white, and the baby will be black. She suddenly claims that she does not want to be a woman, she does not want to be a mother, and that she will kill the baby once it is born: “I’ll bash its brains out. 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). More than anything, this shows how unprepared she is for the birth, how she has tried to deny the existence of the baby, and now has to come face to face with the facts.

Although Jo does not want to be a mother, she does not even consider getting an abortion, but remarks to Geof that she thinks abortion is terrible. Whether abortion was actually possible is debatable, as *A Taste of Honey* was written at a time when abortions were illegal and very dangerous, since it was only in 1967 when the Abortion Act made

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<sup>89</sup> Esche, p. 75

abortions legal.<sup>90</sup> Marwick points out that wealthier women might have had the option of having an abortion done by a medical professional, but “for the less well-off woman suffering from an unwanted pregnancy the choices were two: to go through with the birth, or to seek a back-street abortion, with all its attendant horror and danger”.<sup>91</sup> Although Jo has decided to give birth, she appears wholly unprepared for the arrival of her child, and seems to live in a state of denial. Jo is still a child in some sense, a child that has never experienced childhood, but has been forced to take care of her mother, as on various occasions Jo seems to be the more responsible of the two. She is a child who is going to have a child of her own. She is unprepared to face such a responsibility, as that would mean that she would have to face the reality of what it means to be a woman and a mother. In addition, becoming a mother will mean that Jo will have to accept the realisation of the complexities of that situation, which might perhaps lead her to understand the difficulties her own mother faced. Jo has been so keen on blaming Helen for ruining her life, that she is afraid to look at things from Helen’s point of view. Becoming a mother herself will mean accepting Helen’s and her own fallibility.

Thus, to Jo motherhood is something terrifying and depressing. There is a definite dark undercurrent to the play, despite the fact that there is also plenty of music and humour in it. Jo does mention that she is afraid of the dark, and especially darkness in confined spaces: “I’m not frightened of the darkness outside, it’s the darkness inside houses I don’t like” (22). Yet throughout the play we only see her inside this one room, which seems to be her entire world. Although it is pointed out that Jo has been going to school and working, the play manages to create a rather claustrophobic atmosphere. Especially when she is pregnant, she does not leave her flat, and Geof points out that she does not go out at all. She even plans to have her baby at home, and is determined not to go to the hospital. It

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<sup>90</sup> Marwick, p. 151

<sup>91</sup> Marwick, p. 151

seems as if she is trying to hide from the world, to escape from the responsibilities and expectations that society will place on her as a mother. However, as Helen points out, everyone already knows that Jo is pregnant: “I suppose you think you can hide yourself away in this chicken run, don’t you? Well, you can’t. Everybody knows”. (60). Thus, Jo’s self-quarantine seems to derive from her inability to accept society’s demands.

In addition to suggesting that motherhood does not come naturally to all women, Delaney also presents us with the idea that motherhood is not necessarily gender specific, and that men can be better nurturers than women. As Michelene Wandor points out, it is Geof who takes up the position of “a dual substitute mother”<sup>92</sup>, taking care of Jo and also preparing for the arrival of the baby. He is not just a mother figure for Jo by taking care of her needs, but he also feels excited about the child about to be born, and is preparing for the birth like one would expect a mother to do. Thus, as Wandor continues, “he has all the feelings which, according to conventional gender expectations, Jo should have”.<sup>93</sup>

Nurturance, then, is not something that is confined merely to women, and neither is motherhood. Also, Jo does not want to have a woman with her when she is giving birth, but prefers Geof instead (84), although to Helen it is completely disgusting to have a man witness childbirth, especially a man who is not the husband. Thus, as Jo is questioning her role as a mother and redefining what it means to be a woman, Geof is also redefining his position as a man. Delaney does not give the freedom to choose only to the women in the play, but also realises that men have the same right to defy the prevailing stereotypes, and that Geof’s position emphasises the common struggle for freedom of choice. This is yet another reversal of expected roles that Delaney uses to reassess the institution of family.

The drama, however, ends on a rather ambiguous note. Helen does return to Jo at the end of the play, driving Geof away. However, her reasons are more selfish than she first

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<sup>92</sup> Wandor, p. 61

<sup>93</sup> Wandor, p. 61



admits, and later we find out that in fact Peter has left Helen, and she has no other place to go. After Jo tells Helen that her baby will be partly black, Helen also runs away, leaving Jo alone just as she is about to give birth to her child. Interestingly, Wandor sees the ending of *A Taste of Honey* as a return to the traditional, biological motherhood imperatives.<sup>94</sup> In some productions of the play, as well as in the 1962 film, Helen actually stays with Jo in the end, but in the written version Helen leaves again, stating that she will go out for a drink but that she will be back. Wandor argues that in spite of her leaving, it is obvious that Helen will return, and that Jo actually wants her to come back.<sup>95</sup> However, the ending is anything but unambiguous, and Delaney leaves the whole situation very much open. As Komporaly points out, the reunion, and the following breaking of the mother-daughter relationship, can be analysed both as a reinforcement of traditional motherhood, and as a critique of sexual politics.<sup>96</sup>

Helen's return can be seen to represent the triumph of the socially validated and preferred biological relationship, however unsatisfactory that relationship may be. On the other hand, Helen is breaking up the unconventional but happy family that Jo and Geof have created for themselves. In this sense, the return of motherhood is actually disruptive to the alternative family unit. Helen takes control of all the action, and allows no one else to communicate. Jo and Geof have discussions, whereas Jo and Helen only seem to argue and misunderstand each other. Helen feels that she has the right to control others, and starts to talk about "her daughter" and "her grandchild" (83). Whereas Jo and Geof had a stable and equal relationship, Helen represents a much more oppressive relationship. In the end, it becomes apparent that Helen's grandmotherly love has some limits to it, as Jo reveals that her baby will be partly black: "You mean to say that... that sailor was a black man? ... Oh

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<sup>94</sup> Wandor, p. 62

<sup>95</sup> Wandor, p. 62

<sup>96</sup> Komporaly, p. 19

my God! Nothing else can happen to me now. Can you see me wheeling a pram with a... Oh my God” (86). This time it is Helen’s race prejudice that makes her abandon Jo yet again.

### 3.3 Redefining Womanhood

As Michelene Wandor points out, *A Taste of Honey* was quite a groundbreaking play in that it centred around women, leaving men on the outskirts of the action.<sup>97</sup> Unlike most of the famous plays of the New Wave, which were written by men, *A Taste of Honey* does not concentrate on the emotions of men, but clearly leaves them as rather vague figures, existing only in relation to the women of the play. Thus, Delaney was able to present a point of view which was previously rarely heard, the point of view of women. Jo and Helen represent women who dare to question their preset and prescribed roles in society. As explained in the previous chapters, these are women who do not necessarily wish to be women and mothers in the traditional sense, but who are redefining these conventional roles. Thus, Delaney moves away from the essentialising notion that a woman is not a true woman without motherhood, and that motherhood is what defines a woman’s worth in society.

*A Taste of Honey*, then, presents alternatives to the socially accepted norms of family and motherhood. Not every woman wishes to have children, and giving birth does not necessarily entail any kind of emotional attachment to the child. Even when women do have children, there are alternative family structures that might provide better nurturance than the socially accepted familial unit of the nuclear family or biological motherhood. Delaney shows that the institution of the family is in a crisis. Even when the characters do

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<sup>97</sup> Wandor, p. 61

conform to the traditional roles and structures, they do not succeed at it. Helen does try to act like a proper mother at times, but fails to truly fill that role in Jo's life. Also, Helen talks about giving up sex and men entirely (18), and does eventually get married, and it could be argued that she is conforming to the norm and to the socially accepted family structure. However, although Peter does "make an honest woman" (18) of Helen, their marriage is anything but conventional.

As Helen points out, she is old enough to be Peter's mother, and Peter even jokingly mentions that he likes their mother-son relationship (18). Peter also compares himself to Oedipus (65), a figure from Greek mythology who married his mother by mistake, as famously depicted in the plays of Sophocles. Sigmund Freud used this myth to create his theory of the Oedipus complex, where the son directs his sexual feelings toward the mother, until through normal psychological development he learns to detach these sexual impulses from the mother.<sup>98</sup> Peter, in fact, seems to suffer from unresolved Oedipal issues. Thus, even in this relationship the traditional roles are subverted, and Helen seems to function as a mother figure to her husband.

In many ways *A Taste of Honey* centres on the idea that people are only able to take care of themselves, and that all families, be they traditional or unconventional, will fail in the end. The idea of looking after oneself and ruining one's own life is vocalised throughout the play, both by Helen and Jo. As Helen remarks, "Anyway, it's your life, ruin it your own way. It's a waste of time interfering with other people, don't you think so? It takes me all my time to look after myself, I know that" (13). Both Helen and Jo seem to accept this, as it leaves them with little responsibility for anyone else. In some sense, it is easier to have responsibility only for yourself, and by accepting the failure of family and human relationships, characters lower the expectations placed on themselves. Helen argues

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<sup>98</sup> Freud, S. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Trans. J. Crick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1899), p. 202

that since she has never claimed to be a proper mother, she does not have to behave like one. Jo simply retreats from the world and avoids all relationships, except with Geof, who has a very undemanding presence. Helen's marriage to Peter is a union of two very selfish and irresponsible people, and thus is quite safe for Helen, as she does not really have to invest in it emotionally.

Although *A Taste of Honey* seems to be about looking after yourself, and not caring about anyone else, there are moments in the play when even Jo and Helen need help. Jo seems to be the more responsible of the two, and quite often takes care of Helen, especially at the beginning of the play. Despite the fact that Jimmie, the father of Jo's baby, is not the most trustworthy of people, even he takes care of Jo when she is feeling upset about Helen leaving her behind. And Jo definitely needs Geof's help when she is pregnant, and for a while they form a rather happy family. It is made clear that relationships are desired and that all the characters seek human contact. However, ultimately detachment, individuality and biological imperatives prevail, as neither the traditional nor the unconventional family manages to survive.

The illegitimacy of Jo's child and her unwillingness to seek an abortion can also be seen as a way of defying conventional stereotypes. As Adrienne Rich argues, bearing an illegitimate child in spite of social condemnation, and doing that with pride and by choice, has been a way for women to defy patriarchy. Thus, paradoxically, motherhood and giving birth have been used purposefully, as acts of defiance, "an act of self-assertion by a woman forced to assert herself primarily through her biology".<sup>99</sup> In some sense Jo does defy society's misgivings about lone young mothers and their children, and is determined to have the baby and succeed on her own no matter what other people think. As she tells Helen, "Do you know, for the first time in my life I feel really important. I feel as though I

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<sup>99</sup> Rich, p. 160

could take care of the whole world” (81). However, as mentioned previously, she is also afraid of the expectations that are placed on her as a woman and as a mother. Jo is not having a child purposefully to assert her individuality, but instead fears that motherhood will take away the little independence she has. Still, since Jo is not able to avoid the biological role of motherhood, she accepts this and tries to define her own approach to motherhood.

Lib Taylor argues that Delaney does not really challenge gender stereotypes, since although Helen and Jo resist the traditional role of motherhood, they are still unable to avoid becoming mothers. Taylor writes, “thus motherhood is defined as ‘natural’ for women and, although it fails to satisfy, neither Helen nor Jo are given alternative aspirations”.<sup>100</sup> Komporaly also suggests that although Helen and Jo try to separate their womanhood from birthing and nurturance, in the end both of them accept motherhood as their female destiny.<sup>101</sup> However, they only accept this destiny on their own terms, and do not conform to the socially acceptable view of motherhood. They are forced to accept the fact that as women they are biologically destined to have children, but at the same time they have the power to individually determine what it means to be a mother. It should also be kept in mind that *A Taste of Honey* was written in the 1950s, when the discussion of women’s rights was only beginning to surface. Perhaps from a current perspective the play is lacking in the way it challenges certain stereotypes, but it certainly paved the way for a more open discussion of this topic.

However much Delaney might be said to be redefining womanhood, she does not promote womanhood over manhood; she does not elevate women by putting men down.

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<sup>100</sup> Taylor, L. “Early Stages”. *British and Irish Women Dramatists since 1958: a Critical Handbook*. Ed. T.R. Griffiths and M. Llewellyn-Jones. Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993, p. 19

<sup>101</sup> Komporaly, p. 30

The people of the play are not bad people or good people, they are human beings trying to define their role in society on their own terms. What Delaney is trying to do is to point out that women, just as much as men, should have a choice. She portrays women who do not yield to the stereotypical role of a woman, such as Helen and Jo, but also men who defy norms, such as Geof. She presents us with men who do conform to masculine preconceptions, such as Peter and Jimmie, but shows that women can also hurt and destroy, as in the way Helen treats Geof. As Geof remarks: “Yes, the one thing civilisation couldn’t do anything about – women” (84). What makes Delaney extraordinary is that she offers a woman’s point of view on this topic, and dares to question the prevailing attitudes of what it means to be a woman.

This is how Delaney differs from her male contemporary dramatists. One of the central themes of the plays of the 1950s and 1960s was family and what was perceived to be happening to the family structure. However, as Wandor points out, since the majority of the plays of this period were written from a male perspective, they seem to approach womanhood, and especially motherhood, as something that needs to be weakened in order for the male protagonist to be strong.<sup>102</sup> For instance, in Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, Jimmie can feel like a man only after his wife has lost her ability to have children. This is what Wandor calls “the Lady Macbeth Syndrome”, the “defining of male identity in a way that is predicated on the imaginative annihilation of motherhood”.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, since motherhood is in this context gender-specific, this ultimately means the weakening of womanhood and femininity.

However, in plays by women, motherhood is something that can be discussed in a more constructive way. As Wandor points out, “Whereas for the male-gendered imagination motherhood has to be denied or destroyed for men to develop a sense of self, and female

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<sup>102</sup> Wandor, p. 94

<sup>103</sup> Wandor, p. 96

strength is therefore hedged around, for the female-gendered imaginations female articulacy, dominance in the stage structure and actual motherhood can be explored, although within other imaginative limits, defined by social taboos and theatrical censorship".<sup>104</sup> This is exactly what Delaney is doing, and since the dominant voice had been that of her male contemporaries, her different point of view becomes even more important. Delaney, alongside some of her female contemporaries, redefines motherhood by including women in the *construction* of the definition.

#### 4. Sexuality

As Alan Sinfield points out, it was only a few years before *A Taste of Honey* was performed on stage that Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildeblood were sentenced to prison for committing indecent acts with young men, although these acts were committed in private houses with consenting adults.<sup>105</sup> This is just another example of how anxious the Establishment was about homosexuality at the time, and although in the 1950s homosexuality was considered to be more of a social problem than something evil, the prevailing attitude was still quite negative and even hostile.<sup>106</sup> Since family was seen to be the cornerstone of the nation, the influence of homosexuality on the family was perceived as something that could corrupt the entire social structure.

According to Sinfield it is important to discuss sexuality in relation to the theatre, as theatre is an institution which has strongly influenced the public representation of sexuality, and has often been "a particular site for the formation of dissident sexual

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<sup>104</sup> Wandor, p. 95

<sup>105</sup> Sinfield, A. *Out on Stage. Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 236

<sup>106</sup> Sinfield, p. 237

identities”.<sup>107</sup> This is why the theatre has often been affected by censorship, especially when it comes to unconventional representations of sexuality. Censorship again connects the theatre to the wider national ideology. As Sinfield points out, defenders of censorship claimed that “they were protecting the moral fabric of the nation”, and because one of the aims of censorship was to preserve conservative ideas, “trivial and hostile representations of sexual dissidents were more likely to be allowed than serious and sympathetic treatment”.<sup>108</sup> Although some of the homosexual elements of *A Taste of Honey* were censored when in production, the text itself has a more understanding attitude towards homosexuality than what was common in representations at the time, showing that homosexuality can exist within the family structure without corrupting it.

Delaney was not only representing homosexuality in a more sympathetic light than most of her contemporaries, but also, as Nicholas De Jongh points out, *A Taste of Honey* was the first modern British play to present working-class homosexuality, though De Jongh concedes that Delaney’s attitude is somewhat ambivalent.<sup>109</sup> Delaney depicts Geof as a rather stereotypical homosexual, someone who is effeminate, gentle and artistic, and ultimately powerless. However, as De Jongh continues, these stereotypical features bring Jo comfort and happiness, thus approving femininity in a man.<sup>110</sup> In other words, De Jongh sees *A Taste of Honey* as a beginning of a “revolt against the conventional forms of relationship and for a personal liberation”.<sup>111</sup> *A Taste of Honey* was published and performed at a time when open discussion of homosexuality was not possible, but in its own way it helped pave the way for a more versatile and unconventional approach to different sexualities. In the following chapters, I will examine how sexuality affects the

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<sup>107</sup> Sinfield, p. 1

<sup>108</sup> Sinfield, p. 14

<sup>109</sup> De Jongh, p. 91

<sup>110</sup> De Jongh, p. 92

<sup>111</sup> De Jongh, p. 93



institution of family in *A Taste of Honey*, and how Delaney destabilises the institution of family by including homosexuality within its borders.

#### 4.1 Homosexuality and the Family

Family, especially the traditional patriarchal family unit, has been, as Chris Haywood and Mairtin Ghaill argue, “a main container of the dominant sex/gender order, the central social agency for the making of young femininities and masculinities and a central institution for the affirmation of gender difference”.<sup>112</sup> As this sexual socialisation was understood as one of the major tasks of family, the influence of homosexuality was seen as a kind of contamination that could corrupt both the family and through it the social order itself. If family was supposed to produce stable and conventional sexual identities, homosexuality within family would surely distort this process, and therefore its influence had to be minimised. Thus, as explained earlier, representations of homosexuality were skewed by censorship in order to project homosexuality as a threat to the social order in general.

Perhaps today, as Haywood and Ghaill suggest, the traditional family structure is constantly challenged by high divorce rates, lone parents and new forms of family, which in effect have made the family a more fluid and open concept.<sup>113</sup> However, when *A Taste of Honey* was first performed, the views on family and its function in society were very rigid, and homosexuality was not allowed within these closely monitored borders. Yet, Delaney brings homosexuality to the heart of the family, and through Geof shows that the influence of homosexuality is not necessarily destructive, but that in fact it can be quite the

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<sup>112</sup> Haywood, C., Ghaill, M. *Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research and Social Practice*. Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003, p. 59

<sup>113</sup> Haywood & Ghaill, p. 59

opposite. *A Taste of Honey* portrays a completely new point of view on this topic, one where it is not homosexuality that can have destructive power over the family, but rather biological motherhood that tends to have a negative effect on the construction of stable identities.

Geof's homosexuality is never addressed openly, as this was not permitted at the time due to censorship, but there are several instances where his sexual preferences are strongly implied. Geof is a gentle and emotional art student. He is portrayed as being quite "feminine" and he is the only person in the play who does all the things that women were supposed to do within the family structure: cooking, cleaning, taking care of the household, nurturing, and preparing for the birth of a child. Stephen Lacey even suggests that Geof does not have any of the conventional masculine attributes, which emphasises his homosexuality.<sup>114</sup> Thus, although his sexuality is only implicitly referred to, it is still made clear that he is a homosexual.

There are numerous instances where Geof's homosexuality is indirectly implied. Jo says that Geof is just like a big sister to her (54), and remarks that motherhood seems to come naturally to him:

Geof: Motherhood is supposed to come natural to women.  
 Jo: It comes natural to you, Geoffrey Ingram. You'd make somebody a wonderful wife. (55)

In Act Two, Jo questions Geof about why his landlady has thrown him out, promising him that he can stay with her if he tells her the truth. Geof seems reluctant to reveal the reason, but Jo tries to make him acknowledge the truth: "Who did she find you with? Your girl friend? It wasn't a man, was it?" (47). Although Jo does seem to be rather blunt and quite insensitive at times, she seems to care sincerely about Geof and she does not want him to go away. In the end she does not force the issue, and actually seems to prefer Geof's

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<sup>114</sup> Lacey, p. 94

company, as Geof's homosexuality makes him an undemanding partner. Homosexuality, then, is a positive issue in *A Taste of Honey*, especially for Jo, and although never referred to directly, Geof's sexuality assumes great importance in the play.

Peter, Helen's new husband, and the representative of patriarchal society, seems to be the character who expresses the dominant views of the time on homosexuality. He uses various derogatory terms to refer to Geof: "Mary" (65), "Jezebel" (66), "cuddles" (66), "fruitcake parcel" (68). He even states: "I can't stand the sight of him. Can't stand 'em at any price" (68). This is a reaction fuelled by prejudice and fear, as Peter has barely met Geof when he makes these remarks. This would imply that Geof's appearance and manner of conducting himself are obviously "feminine", as Peter very quickly establishes that Geof does not fit the masculine norms of "proper" manhood. Helen also mirrors Peter's disapproval and disgust, calling Geof "bloody little pansy" (79) and a "pansified little freak" (63), and wonders why Jo has not managed to find someone who is more like a man. For Peter and Helen it is the lack of "masculine" features that make Geof repulsive and unworthy, whereas for Jo, Geof's "feminine" traits are a source of comfort and security.

Through Helen and Peter, Delaney depicts the prevalent social view of homosexuality. However, Jo represents a completely different view, even though she can be quite insensitive when it comes to exposing and addressing Geof's sexuality. Although De Jongh argues that Jo is not grateful to Geof for his support<sup>115</sup>, Jo does accept Geof for what he is, and sees his difference as something positive:

Jo: And what is my usual self? My usual self is a very unusual self, Geoffrey Ingram, and don't you forget it. I'm an extraordinary person. There's only one of me like there's only one of you.  
 Geof: We're unique!  
 Jo: Young.  
 Geof: Unrivalled!

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<sup>115</sup> De Jongh, p. 93

Jo: Smashing!  
 Geof: We're bloody marvellous! (50-51)

As De Jongh points out, “the pregnant and unmarried teenage girl, regarded in the 1950s as an emblem of flagrant immorality, finds common cause with the epitome of supposed degeneracy”.<sup>116</sup> Jo sees that Geof is just as much an outsider as she is in society’s eyes. Perhaps Jo is not completely without prejudice, since she makes a remark which shows that she used to think homosexuality was something different; but she has learned that Geof is just like anybody else: “I used to think you were such an interesting, immoral character before I knew you” (72). Jo is teasing Geof here, but this does show that Delaney is trying to depict a different view on homosexuality to the prevalent one, and points out that sexuality does not determine one’s morality.

Both Jo and Geof enjoy the mutual understanding they share, and find comfort in each other. As De Jongh points out, Geof functions as a surrogate mother to Jo, and he, as a mother figure, is actually more altruistic and valuable to Jo than the one person who should perform this role, Helen.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, Jo offers Geof a home and companionship, and perhaps, with the birth of the baby, a family and acceptance in the eyes of society. De Jongh states that “Geof is being both applauded and mocked, as if Jo cannot fathom or approve the reasons for which a man can assume a supposedly female role”.<sup>118</sup> De Jongh seems to think that Jo does not accept Geof’s homosexuality and femininity. However, in some sense Jo’s approach to Geof, her surrogate mother, mirrors that of Jo’s approach to her real mother. At first Jo is trying to distance herself from Geof by using the same strategy that she used with Helen, which is attacking Helen verbally before she has a chance to attack Jo. As mentioned earlier, Helen and Jo do not really communicate, and Jo

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<sup>116</sup> De Jongh, p. 92

<sup>117</sup> De Jongh, p. 92

<sup>118</sup> De Jongh, p. 92-93

seems to expect a similar response from Geof as she would get from Helen. However, Geof is not verbally offensive in the same way as Helen, and eventually he and Jo find a common language. Jo is used to being ignored and independent, and does not necessarily know how to accept help and comfort from another person. Jo's approach to Geof is a way of testing him to see how far she can go before he leaves, just like Helen did. However, it is Geof's unconditional love and help that eventually breaks through her barrier, and creates a harmony that never existed between Jo and Helen.

Dan Rebellato argues that Geof is a rather strange homosexual, because he seems uncertain about his sexuality and has no contact with the queer community.<sup>119</sup> It is true that Geof is not always that confident about his homosexuality. Geof remarks to Jo that he might "start something" (57) with her after the baby is born. He also almost forcibly kisses Jo and asks her to marry him (58). Geof seems to be quite desperate to have a traditional family, to fit into the norm he is otherwise excluded from. Most likely, though, Geoff is not so much looking for a family as a sense of belonging, of purpose. As he states: "Before I met you I didn't care one way or the other – I didn't care whether I lived or died. But now..." (59). Like Jo, Geof is an outsider, unloved and misunderstood, and is seeking love and acceptance. Geof seems to perceive marriage as the only way they can stay together, and he does not seem to believe that the unconventional family they have will be able to last without the acceptance of the surrounding society. The only way to continue is to adhere to the norm, to the traditional family structure, no matter how false that structure would be in their case.

In *A Taste of Honey* Geof represents a homosexual whose role within the family is to nurture, not to corrupt, whereas biological motherhood is presented as something rather destructive. However, as Lib Taylor points out, even though Geof resists the prescribed

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<sup>119</sup> Rebellato, D. *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*. London: Routledge, 1999, p. 217

gender role by being nurturing, he ultimately fails to be a proper substitute for a mother.<sup>120</sup>

Due to his gentleness and kindness Geof is no match for Helen, whose influence is far too powerful for Geof to resist, which leads to the destruction of the alternative family Geof and Jo have created. Geof is not allowed within the family structure, but is excluded from the unit as the representative of biological motherhood returns and drives him out.

However, unlike many traditional representations, Delaney shows that the effects of homosexuality on the family can be something positive, and that including different sexualities within the family structure is not necessarily destructive.

#### 4.2 Male Nurturance

Another theme relating to homosexuality and family in *A Taste of Honey* is the representation of nurturance. As mentioned in the previous chapters, nurturance was seen as something feminine, and the role of the nurturer within a family was always performed by the woman, the mother. Portraying this nurturing quality in a man and denying it to the women of the play was something rather unique, and is a clear reversal of gender roles. In some sense both Jo and Helen are portrayed as rather “masculine” characters. Both are the head of the household, independent, articulate, and making their own money. Helen does not deny or hide her sexuality, and has not allowed motherhood to diminish her sexual activity. Jo is also a quite ambiguous character with her denial of womanhood; even her name, “Jo”, is not gender specific. Whereas in other plays of the period women functioned far more as objects than as subjects, in *A Taste of Honey* the women are at the centre of the action, taking the place traditionally occupied by men. Similarly, Geof represents the reversed role of a man who is “feminine” and nurturing.

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<sup>120</sup> Taylor, L, p. 19

Geof is the most sensitive and caring of the characters in this play, and he seems to be the person who has most empathy and compassion for others. There are many instances within *A Taste of Honey* where his sensitivity and consideration are clearly shown. As Geof says, “I can’t stand people who laugh at other people. They’d get a bigger laugh if they laughed at themselves” (48). Geof knows how it feels to be on the outside, but instead of being bitter, he feels sympathy for outsiders. He says “who knows who are the fools and the wise men in this world” (74). He has an understanding of people and their motives, and he can look beyond the appearance and see behind the façade. Thus, even though he does not really understand Helen’s treatment of Jo, he is still able to analyse some of her actions quite accurately.

For instance, Helen has told Jo that Jo’s father was a “village idiot”: “He was just a bit stupid, you know. Not very bright” (43). This has left Jo very anxious about her own mental health as she thinks that madness is hereditary. Geof immediately understands where both Helen and Jo are coming from:

Jo: He lived in a twilight land, my daddy. The land of the daft.  
 Geof: Did she tell you all this?  
 Jo: Yes.  
 Geof: I’m not surprised. It sounds like Ibsen’s *Ghosts*. I don’t know where Helen gets them from, I don’t really.  
 Jo: I had to drag it out of her. She didn’t want to tell me.  
 Geof: That doesn’t mean to say it’s the truth. Do people ever tell the truth about themselves?  
 Jo: Why would she want to spin me a yarn like that?  
 Geof: She likes to make an effect.  
 Jo: Like me?  
 Geof: You said it. (73)

Here Geof refers to Henrik Ibsen’s play *Ghosts* (1881). *Ghosts* also deals with a dysfunctional family, and discusses how contamination, be it moral, psychological or physical, can spread within a family, reflecting the situation of *A Taste of Honey*. *Ghosts* also created great controversy and dismay when it was first performed, as it dealt with taboo topics such as venereal disease, incest and infidelity in the context of family.

Geof compares Ibsen's ability to shock people to that of Helen's, and he understands that there might be some ulterior motives for Helen's declaration of Jo's origin. Similarly, he sees that Jo is upset about all of this, and is very frank in his disapproval of Helen's methods. Geof is able to make Jo stop worrying, and he knows exactly the right words to do that: "Well, I didn't think you could be so daft. Can you see Helen going out with a real loony!" (74). His sensitivity to other people's emotions and his sense of humour makes him a very comforting person. As De Jongh points out, "Geof emerges from the play and Delaney's pen as the one authentically good person within it; the exception to prevailing selfishness, and the odd man out in situations where everyone is struggling to achieve what they want, or what they feel they need".<sup>121</sup>

Thus, Geof is a very perceptive character when it comes to people's emotions and actions, and he can analyse Jo quite well. He notices that Jo's paintings reflect her personality, and points out that they are just like Jo, "there's no design, rhythm or purpose" (48). He is also the one to point out that Jo is actually very much like her mother, no matter how much Jo tries to convince herself that she is nothing like Helen. Similarly, he sees that many of the rather rash and aggressive outbursts of Jo are just acting, and when she declares that she is going to throw herself into the river, he just tells her to stop putting on performances and stop pitying herself. Again, Geof occupies the position of a parent in relation to Jo. Unlike Helen, who would have most likely just reinforced Jo's insecurities, Geof approaches her emotional insecurities with rational responses.

Both Jo and Helen are quite used to taking care of themselves, and have always tried to detach themselves from each other, and have not accepted responsibility for anyone else. However, it is Geof who points out that it is not enough anymore for Jo to just take care of herself, and that she needs someone to look after her (57). Geof realises that Jo has not

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<sup>121</sup> De Jongh, p. 93



really understood the effects that the new baby will have on her life. Geof sees Jo as a chance to have a family of his own, something which he would not otherwise have. This is a chance for Geof to be nurturing within the socially accepted framework of a family. Although in the end they settle for an undemanding, asexual relationship, Geof's nurturance has made a difference to Jo's life. Without Geof, Jo would most likely turn out just like Helen, completely unprepared to bring up a child.

What emphasises Geof's sensitivity and his role as a nurturer is his attitude towards the soon-to-be-born baby of Jo's. Geof states that he likes babies and says he would like to be the father of Jo's baby. Whereas Jo is very ambivalent about her coming motherhood, Geof seems to be unequivocally excited about the arrival of the baby, and is trying to get Jo to participate in his excitement. Geoff is also a great believer in the mother's love for her child, and is unable to understand Helen's and Jo's reluctance to play the part. He is the one who tells Helen about Jo's pregnancy, as Jo has decided not to let Helen know that she is expecting a baby:

Jo: I told you to keep out of my affairs, Geoffrey. I'm not having anybody running my life for me. What do you think you're running? A "Back to Mother" movement?

Geof: Your mother has a right to know.

Jo: She's got no rights where I'm concerned.

Geof seems to be the only person in the play to prefer the normal family structure and to emphasise the importance of the biological connection, even when the structure is obviously not working. It is only when he meets Helen that he begins to realise the destructive nature of that biological connection.

Delaney dares to reverse the gender roles within the family structure, and presents us with a nurturing male occupying the position of a mother. However, due to his homosexuality, Geof does not fit into the stereotypical image of a man, and he has mainly "feminine" rather than "masculine" characteristics. The other men of the play are still

rather stereotypical: Jimmie gets Jo pregnant and then leaves her alone to take care of the baby; Peter is a drunken and bad tempered homophobe lusting after a woman old enough to be his mother. Although Jimmie does seem protective towards Jo at times, neither he nor Peter portray nurturing qualities like Geof. Thus, male nurturance within *A Taste of Honey* is restricted to a man who in the traditional sense is not a “proper” man. Although Geof is more “feminine” than the other men, even his inclusion in the family structure is only temporary. It seems that the notion of family in *A Taste of Honey* excludes men from its realm, and represents a family within which sexual activity is absent.

#### 4.3 Asexual Family

*A Taste of Honey* destabilises the concept of family by representing the institution of family in a completely new light. Unlike the traditional representations of family at the time, where the action within the family unit revolved around the male figure and his identity, Delaney’s family consists solely of women. It is implied that Helen has had multiple partners, but they, as well as Jimmie and Peter, only briefly enter the family arena, and quite quickly are expelled from its sphere. Delaney’s family excludes men from the family unit altogether. The only man who is allowed within this family, that is Geof, is actually more “feminine” than the women of the play, and eventually even he is driven out by the return of biological motherhood. In some sense, then, family becomes an asexual structure centred on women.

There are many different asexual families in the play. It is related that Helen’s first marriage was to a “puritan”, who did not see sexual activity as a part of marriage. As Jo explains: “You see her husband thought sex was dirty, and only used the bed for sleeping in” (72). This led to Helen having an affair with Jo’s father, which then destroyed Helen’s

marriage. Here again, sexuality is depicted as destructive to the traditional family unit and therefore is excluded from it. Similarly, Helen and Jo form a family where men are not included, although it is made clear that Helen has been a sexually active woman. However, this sexual activity takes place outside the family structure, and Helen and Jo form the only constant unit. This can also be seen in the fact that even though Helen and Peter do have a sexual relationship, that relationship is only temporary, as Helen does return to Jo in the end, if only briefly. Also, Jo and Geof represent a new kind of family, although just as asexual as the rest of them, due to Geof's homosexuality. Sexuality, then, is something that seems to exist only outside the family, and yet is damaging to the family structure.

Thus, sexuality in *A Taste of Honey* is seen as something undesired and unwelcome in relation to the family. This is especially the case with Jo, to whom sexuality seems only to denote unwanted effects such as rejection and pregnancy. As Komporaly points out, "for Jo, Helen's sexual availability for others has always connoted lack of maternal affection".<sup>122</sup> This has left Jo unable to attach emotionally to anyone, and unwilling to include sexuality within the family unit. Also, she is only beginning to understand the fact that no matter how much she wishes to deny her womanhood, she is still trapped in the same role as her mother. She is still unable to avoid the biological imperative of womanhood: pregnancy. As Komporaly again suggests, "the realization that female destiny is thrust upon her triggers her deepest fears".<sup>123</sup> This struggle to understand the complex nature of sex and womanhood makes her search for an alternative family, one where sexuality is excluded from the definition.

This is why Jo seems to feel relaxed and comfortable only with Geof, whose homosexuality makes him quite an unthreatening partner. As Jo remarks, "I'm sick of love. That's why I'm letting you stay here. You won't start anything." (53). Geof is only allowed

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<sup>122</sup> Komporaly, p. 18

<sup>123</sup> Komporaly, p. 19

within Jo's definition of family since he is homosexual and "feminine", and lacks all the "masculine" features. When Geof asks Jo if she would like to have Jimmie, the father of the child, back, she states that "I don't want any man." (75). Thus, Geof does not force Jo to acknowledge her biological status as a woman, since as an effeminate homosexual man he is less likely to make her pregnant, whereas Jo fears the reproductive power of a heterosexual man over a woman. In that sense Geof is a safe choice for Jo, although in his desperate need to have a family he does attempt to approach Jo sexually. On Geof's part, this is a half-hearted attempt to be included in a socially validated structure, and his advances are quickly made void by Jo. As she states, "I always want to have you with me because I know you'll never ask anything from me." (76). The undemanding nature of their relationship is the main reason Geof is allowed within the family, though his inclusion is only temporary.

Similarly, Geof does not compel Jo to accept the role she would otherwise be required to play as a mother, the representative and protector of the core values of the society and nation. Geof accepts Jo for who she is, even though she, an unmarried teenage mother, is another paradigm of moral degeneracy. Geof is just as much an outsider to the surrounding society as Jo is, and therefore Jo does not see him as a representative of that society and its views. Geof does not demand anything from Jo, neither sexually nor in terms of expected behaviour, and does not judge Jo even though he does seem to think that Jo's behaviour towards her pregnancy is somewhat unnatural. It is the outside world with its disapproval, expectations, and requirements that Jo is unwilling to face, as she feels that she is being determined and defined from the outside, leaving her powerless to create her own definition of motherhood. Jo is pleased to realise that Geof is able and willing to accept the role of a "woman" within their unconventional family, as this leaves Jo with little responsibility to behave in a socially acceptable manner. Because their roles within the

family are reversed, Jo does not feel the need to behave like a normal mother, as that role is fulfilled by Geof. Regardless of Geof's attempts to make Jo express maternal feelings, Jo is determined not to conform.

So far as Jo is concerned, she and Geof are already married, not in the conventional sense, but in the sense that they constitute a family of their own making: "It's a bit daft talking about getting married, isn't it? We're already married. We've been married for a thousand years" (76). Whereas Geof would prefer a more socially validated structure, Jo is happy to accept an alternative view on marriage and family, as this asexual, undemanding family is the only one that has made her happy. As Stephen Lacey argues, "it is implicit that happiness can only be found in a 'family' that is constituted on a different basis to that of the traditional family, one which breaks all the rules, and in which the central role, that of mother, is detached from the biological mother and becomes the subject of negotiation".<sup>124</sup> This family is the only one in *A Taste of Honey* that actually offers any support and nurturance, and is shown to be – while it lasts – a more stable and caring unit than the one that is based on biology.

According to Alan Sinfield, the general attitude of the New Wave authors towards homosexuality was far less kind than Delaney's, and many plays showed signs of both misogyny and homophobia.<sup>125</sup> Thus, *A Taste of Honey* shows an emergent change in the way that homosexuals were depicted in drama. As De Jongh argues, in a *Taste of Honey* "the homosexual is humanised and brought in from the cold".<sup>126</sup> It is shown that unconventional sexualities can function within the family without destroying this basic unit, and indeed add a new dimension to it. Nurturance is not only confined to women, and thus motherhood is not necessarily gender specific. The socially validated family structure

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<sup>124</sup> Lacey, p. 95

<sup>125</sup> Sinfield, p. 255

<sup>126</sup> De Jongh, p. 93

and traditional gender roles become negotiable, flexible and less rigid. The relationship between family and sexuality is thus redefined, and the concept of a nuclear family is shown to be unstable.

## 5. Ethnic Background

The ideas of unity and purity have been at the heart of national discourse, and questioning these ideals was considered quite radical and perhaps even unpatriotic. After World War II, as the British Empire began to divide into new independent nations such as India, Britain was faced with many questions regarding the borders of the nation and the inclusion of outside elements. As Catherine Hall writes:

If the English have not succeeded in making Britain, let alone the empire, ‘English throughout’, what are the effects? If Englishness is no longer a hegemonic identity, defining the national characteristics of all those who claim belonging in Britain, then what does it mean to be British? When the fantasy of ‘ethnological unity’ – one people, one nation – can no longer be maintained, what kind of nation is left?<sup>127</sup>

To avoid the confusion created by these questions and to control nationalistic discourse, the image of England being a unified nation, and pure in its ethnic background, was reinforced. Again, since family was seen as the cornerstone of the nation, and the protector of its core values, the socially validated and traditionally endorsed definition of family was used to exclude any unwanted elements.

Throughout history, the concept of family has been used as a means of cultural control, and a particular racialised notion of family was eventually normalised in England, privileging the white nuclear family. As Chambers writes, “from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the state and various institutions within the educational system,

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<sup>127</sup> Hall, C. “Introduction: Thinking the Postcolonial, Thinking the Empire”. *Cultures of Empire. Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 2

commerce and trade contributed to the construction of a whole mythology around race, gender and nation that converged on a distinctive and narrow set of discourses about the family”.<sup>128</sup> Family became a crucial method for maintaining the national agenda, and also a means of controlling the social and moral order of the nation. In many ways the racial dimension to family was even more important since, as Werner Sollors points out, the concept of an interracial family evoked questions regarding the origins of people, including the origins of the nation.<sup>129</sup> It disturbed the notion of common ancestry by presenting the idea that nobody was pure to begin with. This attempt to ensure that the English family (and nation) would stay pure, eventually led to the exclusion of any “foreign” external elements from discussions on the institution of the family.

However, it was not only that the white nuclear family was used as the norm and thus preferred over others, but that other family structures were considered abnormal. As Chambers points out, the black families that migrated to Britain during the 1950s and 1960s were considered to be “deviant and unstable”.<sup>130</sup> Brewer agrees with Chambers’ view, and notes that “British racial exclusivity depended quite heavily on representing both Asian and Afro-Caribbean families as pathological”.<sup>131</sup> It is clear, then, that ethnic background and nationality played a vital role in the demarcation of the English family, and through it the construction of national identity. Here again, Delaney destabilises the institution of family by presenting us with an English family that is not originally English, as Jo’s ancestors are from Ireland. Delaney suggests that ultimately the English family is not so unified in its origins, and further complicates the matter by making Jo’s baby partly black. Through her depiction of an English family of such a diverse background, Delaney is reconstructing national identity.

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<sup>128</sup> Chambers, p. 37

<sup>129</sup> Sollors, p. 41

<sup>130</sup> Chambers, p. 38

<sup>131</sup> Brewer, M.F. *Staging Whiteness*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 2005, p. 114

## 5.1 Race and the Family

As Delgado and Stefancic argue, representations of men of colour have traditionally been intensely negative, and these negative images were not so much a product of ignorance but served a social purpose. Portraying black men as either hapless or animalistic helped to support the agenda of the dominant society, and these representations would change according to social needs, to justify either slavery or repression.<sup>132</sup> Whichever the case, the images were ultimately negative. Delaney, however, offers a different view on the traditional representations, and dares to portray a black man who is neither hapless nor animalistic. Instead, *A Taste of Honey* portrays a black man who in his manners and behaviour does not differ that much from any man, be he white or black.

The concept of race is introduced in the form of Jimmie, Jo's black boyfriend who makes a brief appearance at the beginning of the play, but whose influence continues to be present throughout. We only find out his name, Jimmie, much later in the play. When he first appears, he is only referred to as "boy", which, in addition to the briefness of his appearance, leaves him a rather vague character, much like the other male characters of the play. Although Jimmie gets Jo pregnant and then leaves her, he is not vilified in the play, and his actions are not portrayed as typical for a black man, but perhaps rather typical for any man. Men are not really included in the families of *A Taste of Honey*, and Jimmie ends up being just as much of an outsider to the family structure as any other man. He is not really blamed for leaving Jo, but rather it is made clear that no man, regardless of his colour, can ultimately exist within this particular representation of family.

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<sup>132</sup> Delgado, R., Stefancic, J. "Minority Men, Misery, and the Marketplace of Ideas". *Constructing Masculinity*. Ed. M. Berger, B. Wallis and S. Watson. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 217



As Wandor points out, Jimmie “carries none of the immediately sinister overtones of a feared racial Other”.<sup>133</sup> Jimmie seems very friendly and caring. He used to be a nurse before joining the Navy, which again brings the idea of male nurturance to the foreground. In Jimmie, Jo finds the attention and affection she never received from Helen. Jimmie is also easygoing and light-hearted, and jokes a great deal with Jo. For instance, after he has asked Jo to marry him, he teases her for trapping him:

Boy: It’s a sad story, Jo. Once, I was a happy young man, not a care in the world. Now! I’m trapped into a barbaric cult...  
 Jo: What’s that? Mau-Mau?  
 Boy: Matrimony. (25)

In the end, Jimmie is just a typical young man. He goes drinking with his friends. He makes a promise to marry Jo, but leaves her and their unborn child. Just like the women of the play, Jimmie is neither good nor bad; he is not perfect, but a normal human being.

Jimmie is a Navy sailor, which might be one of the reasons why Jo is quite attracted to him. Jimmie offers her a rather undemanding relationship without any fear of being trapped, or having responsibility for someone else, much like Geof later on in the play. Jo acknowledges the fact that once Jimmie is gone, she will probably never see him again: “I just know it. That’s all. But I don’t care. Stay with me now, it’s enough, it’s all I want, and if you do come back I’ll still be here” (38-39). She does not really care about the future, she lives in the moment, and does not seem to understand that a sexual relationship can have consequences. In many ways Jo is trying not to live in the real world, which is also shown by the fact that she, for instance, likes to read fairy tales (34), and later in the play by her inability to think about the effect the unborn child will have on her life. Jimmie is just another example of Jo’s unwillingness to commit.

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<sup>133</sup> Wandor, p. 61

Thus, as with all the male characters of the play, Jimmie only seems to function as an affirmation of the independence of the female characters, as well as a catalyst between Jo and Helen. When Jimmie asks Jo what she thinks Helen will say about their marriage, Jo tells Jimmie that Helen is not prejudiced about colour (23). This might imply that Helen has had affairs with black men herself. However, what Jo does not realise is that Helen might not be open-minded enough to accept a grandchild who is partly black. Although Helen does not seem to mind what other people think about her, there are certain things that are taboo for her, especially when it comes to appearances. Alternatively, Jo might be just downplaying Helen's prejudices to mislead Jimmie, since she is always willing to shock Helen, and knows that marrying a black man would be the ultimate exercise of defiance. Also, as mentioned earlier, Jo can be seen to accept Jimmie's proposal partly to prove something to Helen. Thus, Jo seems to be using Jimmie just as much as he might be using her. This is why Jimmie does not come across as someone who is evil, and his skin colour does not become the main focus of his character.

Although it can be said that Delaney portrays Jimmie in a much more positive light than traditional depiction of black men, she still makes it clear that Jimmie is in some sense an outsider. Even Jo has certain preconceptions when it comes to Jimmie's background:

Jo: Did your ancestors come from Africa?

Boy: No, Cardiff. Disappointed? Were you hoping to marry a man whose father beat the tom-tom all night?

Jo: I don't care where you were born. There's still a bit of jungle in you somewhere. (25)

This flirtatious dialogue shows that Jo is obviously interested in the wild side of Jimmie. Jo even invents a story of Jimmie being a prince "from darkest Africa" (53) when telling Geof about him. Suddenly Jimmie, a regular chap, has turned into a "black beast of a prince" (58). Here Delaney is trying to subvert certain preconceptions about black men by showing that stereotypical, prejudiced images are not necessarily based on reality. However, Jimmie

seems to be quite aware of the fact that his relationship with Jo faces disapproval from the society they live in. After kissing Jo, he asks whether she is afraid that someone will see them. As Jo says that she does not care, Jimmie points out that “You’re the first girl I’ve met who really didn’t care” (23). He has obviously been a victim of prejudice before, and is attracted to Jo’s apparently open-minded attitude, not realising that Jo might have some ulterior motives for accepting his proposal.

Jimmie also jokingly compares himself to Shakespeare’s Othello, and asks Jo to be his Desdemona. This again brings the colour of skin to the foreground, and highlights the race issue. In *Othello*, Shakespeare depicts Othello and Desdemona as characters that are in some sense outsiders in the social community they inhabit, be it due to race, gender or location, much like Jo and Jimmie. Othello is a Moor faced with a rather hostile environment, having to deal with both outright and veiled racism. Desdemona, objectified to begin with due to her gender, is also quite at a loss when it comes to her identity once she is taken out of her former, familiar frame of reference due to her marriage with Othello. Desdemona is intrigued by the mysterious and adventurous outsider, which mirrors Jo’s attraction to Jimmie. However, what neither Jimmie nor Jo seems to realise is that Othello and Desdemona’s relationship could not survive the pressures of society and that their story ended in tragedy. Through this reference to *Othello*, Delaney is pointing out that the issue of race is deeply rooted in English drama. Indeed, blackness is shown to be an integral part of English literature and culture.

Traditionally, the question of inter-ethnic relationships has been seen in the light of slavery. As Werner Sollors points out, “in many cases, the conflict between family and race resulted in the denial of ‘white’ paternity of ‘black’ children”.<sup>134</sup> However, in *A Taste of Honey* this conflict has been reversed: it is black paternity which denies fatherhood.

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<sup>134</sup> Sollors, p. 44

Jimmie is in the position of power, not due to the colour of his skin, but because he is a man. He has the power to get Jo pregnant, a power which was traditionally reserved to the slave owners over their black slaves. Here that power is given to a black man over a white woman, and through her over the English family itself. This is again an example of how *A Taste of Honey* reverses certain expected relationships and thus dares to question the prevailing attitude towards race and family.

As Sonya O Rose suggests, wartime intensifies moral discourse around national unity, as nation is seen as the source of common identity, in this case common white identity.<sup>135</sup> World War II increased the significance of national identity, which meant that influences that were not deemed suitable were excluded from national discourse. This also meant that family became a significant battlefield against any unwanted elements, such as inter-racial relationships. The inclusion of the racial dimension to the traditional family would have meant that the difference between the Self and the Other would be disturbed, and thus also the clear borders of the nation would become blurred. Therefore the idea of inter-racial relationships was seen as a threat to national unity, and as Rose points out, “the spectre of ‘half-caste’ babies threatened to blur the racial lineaments of white British national identity and make the new black presence a permanent ‘social problem’ rather than a temporary wartime inconvenience or one limited to the colonies and to a few port areas in the metropole”.<sup>136</sup> Delaney dares to bring this issue to centre stage, and destabilise the image of a racially pure family and nation.

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<sup>135</sup> Rose, S.O. “Sex, Citizenship, and the Nation in World War II Britain”. *Cultures of Empire. Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: a Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 247

<sup>136</sup> Rose, p. 254

## 5.2 Nationality and Belonging

Another aspect of ethnic background that is evident in *A Taste of Honey* is the nationality of some of its main characters. Since they are white, Helen and Jo would pass as English more easily than Jimmie, as his skin colour would make assimilation into mainstream society more difficult. However, neither Helen, Jo nor Jimmie are purely English in their background, and they are the people who will form families in England, and through these families shape English national identity. Here again family is connected with the larger national ideology, and Delaney questions the prevailing assumption that a true English family consists of people who are “purely” English. The play rejects the idea that people, families and nations can be pure in that sense, and suggests that diversity is inevitable even when on the surface there seems to be uniformity.

The national background of Helen and Jo is brought up at the end of the play. Jo points out that Helen’s father was Irish, as was her own father. The Irish issue has deep roots in the history of Britain, and Irish elements in society have long been oppressed and suppressed. As Mary F Brewer points out, historically speaking racial oppression by the British was not always based solely on skin colour, but depended on the “perceived gradation of cultural and moral refinement” of a particular group of people.<sup>137</sup> Thus, at times, even the Irish were perceived to be a distinct race, and were often compared to Blacks, regardless of the colour of their skin. As Brewer suggests, the oppression was justified by the supposedly uncivilised and savage nature of the Irish, mirroring the stereotypes later used to justify colonial action in other parts of the world.<sup>138</sup> Donald M. MacRaild further notes that it was during the Victorian era that many of these stereotypes of exaggerated moral decay (poverty, drunkenness, Catholicism) were created in order to

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<sup>137</sup> Brewer, p. 2

<sup>138</sup> Brewer, p. 2

find a scapegoat for various social problems that had little to do with the Irish themselves.<sup>139</sup>

This history of mistrust and misrepresentation made the lives of Irish immigrants quite difficult. However, as pointed out earlier, after World War II it was still much easier for a white immigrant to assimilate into the society: “Because they could be absorbed into the category of whiteness, these groups were viewed as more compatible with British society, including even the Irish, who had once been compared to Blacks”.<sup>140</sup> The historical prejudice was still quite strong, and Catholic Irish migrants were often faced with a rather hostile, Protestant environment and were met with antipathy and even violence. MacRaidl notes that in Glasgow and Liverpool, for instance, “sectarian riots remained a feature of communal life until World War II”.<sup>141</sup> Much like any other element that could be seen to corrupt the “true” English family, the Irish influence was another source of anxiety for the Establishment.

The Irish background of Helen and Jo is raised when Geof wonders why Jo must shout at him, and Jo remarks that it is because she is Irish, portraying the stereotype of the Irish as brash and noisy. However, Delaney is again destabilising stereotypes by appropriating and subverting them. As with demonstrating that Jimmie does not fit the prevalent stereotype of a black man, she also shows that the stereotype of Irishness is constructed in much the same way. Geof, again being very perceptive, points out that Jo cannot make much of a claim to being Irish: “Fine Irishwoman you are. Where did your ancestors fall, in the Battle of Salford Town Hall” (73), referring to the fact that Jo is born and bred in Salford, UK. To Geof, Jo is actually more British than Irish, and he does not see Jo’s national ancestry as something exceptionally important. However, due to the unattainable

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<sup>139</sup> MacRaidl, D.H. *Irish Migrants in Modern Britain, 1750-1922*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, p. 5

<sup>140</sup> Brewer, p. 111-112

<sup>141</sup> MacRaidl, p. 155

ideal of national unity, the prevailing attitude towards the Irish would have excluded them from the concept of “true Britishness”, and thus the significance of Jo’s background becomes apparent. Both Helen’s father as well as Jo’s father were Irish, and the inclusion of the Irish element in *A Taste of Honey* highlights the notion that the British family is far from being unified and pure, and that even families that might on the surface seem “purely English” can actually be quite heterogeneous.

As mentioned earlier, the prevailing stereotype of the Irish was quite negative, portraying them as immoral, degenerate and mentally challenged, although this image was perhaps not so strong in the 1950s as it was before World War II. Still, the Irish represented an unwanted element in the structure of the nation. It can be argued that in some sense *A Taste of Honey* mirrors this stereotype. Helen and Jo can be seen as immoral, bad mothers, social outcasts living in squalor and unable to better themselves or their lives. In addition, Helen has told Jo that Jo’s father, who was Irish, was also retarded, again suggesting that the Irish background represents something undesired. However, as Geof already implied by rejecting Jo’s declaration of her Irishness, Jo is just as English as he is, and her background does not change the fact that she is a citizen of Great Britain. This is the point that Delaney can be seen to be making: These are the families that will form the new England, no matter their ethnic background or sexuality. Delaney is suggesting that no matter how hard the Establishment is trying to exclude these themes from the discourse of the family, they are issues that will have to be faced at some point, since families in England, as well as the nation itself, are becoming less and less homogeneous.

One of the main themes of *A Taste of Honey*, then, is belonging. In many ways none of the characters really belong in the surrounding society, since they are unable to meet the idealistic expectations of what is required of people to be included in that society. Neither Helen nor Jo fit the role of motherhood, and they both try to escape their preset female

destiny. Jo is also an artist, partly Irish and an unwed teenage mother of a partly black child, placing her in the position of an outsider on multiple fronts. Helen marries money, and pretends to belong in her new environment, but eventually is forced to return to her old way of life. Jimmie is a black man in a more-or-less segregated society, faced with racism and prejudice. Similarly, Geof is a homosexual living in a homophobic society, where effeminacy and nurturance are not considered acceptable for a man. The characters of *A Taste of Honey* live on the periphery of society, and they represent unwanted elements that are kept outside the discussion on family and nation. They are the Other to the hegemonic Self that was created and maintained by the Establishment in order to uphold the conventional idea of homogeneity, both within families as well as in the larger, national context. However, they also function as a reminder that these established structures can be destabilised.



## 6. Conclusion

Laurence Kitchin argues that due to its public nature, drama, more so than other arts, is a product of the society that produces it. This is its essence but also its limitation. Drama responds to and is affected by the social climate.<sup>142</sup> Thus, post-World War II drama reflected the anxieties of the surrounding society, and in the late 1950s the New Wave dramatists were investigating these concerns from a fresh point of view, regardless of the attempts by the Establishment to censor certain types of representations and favour the ones that enforced conventional values. As Brewer points out, playwrights of the 1950s examined the position of the white British subject, and explored the many societal changes that had made that position less stable and more prone to uncertainties.<sup>143</sup>

Since family was at the heart of nationalistic discourse, the role of family in the construction of national identity became important. As Mary Brewer argues, “the family was the focus of social reconstruction in the post war era, and the recoverability of British greatness was believed to reside in its success”.<sup>144</sup> After World War II, the British family became a new battlefield, and upholding its rigid boundaries was seen as a means of controlling the borders of the nation itself. The conventional family structure was considered to be something natural, but at the same time very vulnerable, and therefore the hegemonic definition of family excluded any elements that could be seen to corrupt the unit, and through it the nation.

Similarly, representations of family were monitored to make sure that the hegemonic view of the family would remain unquestioned. This did not mean that there were no opposing voices, and in spite of censorial constraints new ideas were emerging. In many

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<sup>142</sup> Kitchin, p. 28

<sup>143</sup> Brewer, p. 53

<sup>144</sup> Brewer, p. 57

ways Delaney was ahead of her time, and dealt with issues such as women's rights, dissident sexualities and ethnicities before they became acceptable and even desirable. *A Taste of Honey* revolves around these controversial issues: it gives women power over the way they are constructed in the formation of nation; it suggests that "femininity" and "masculinity" are relational and cultural expressions of gender rather than direct effects of biological sex; and it suggests that diversity exists where perceived uniformity is traditionally enforced.

Women have always been in a critical position when it comes to the construction of nation, since they are the biological, cultural and symbolic creators of the nation. Women's role within the traditional family was to give birth to children, socialise these children to the cultural norms of the society, and thus symbolically create the nation. However, as women have traditionally been left outside the political discourse of nationhood, the definition of what it means to be a woman and a mother have tended to come from the outside, and therefore this definition has been coloured by political agendas. Delaney, on the other hand, presents us with two women who dare to question these traditional definitions, and who redefine their position in society on their own terms.

Similarly, as family was the main site for the creation of gender identities, any elements that could be seen to distort this process, such as unconventional sexualities, have been excluded from the traditional definition of family. Depicting homosexuality as something nurturing rather than corruptive in the context of family represents a shift towards a more tolerant and sympathetic treatment towards different sexualities and their influence over the main functions of family, such as nurturance and socialisation. *A Taste of Honey* also anticipates a change in the discourse of gender differences by questioning the connection between sex and gender. Furthermore, Delaney shows that the ideas of homogeneity and

purity, the central principles of nationalistic discourse, are deceptive concepts, and that families, much like nations, are a collection of individuals from various backgrounds.

Delaney illustrates that the traditional definition of family can be destabilised, although her approach is not explicitly political. *A Taste of Honey* does not debate any of the issues presented, nor does it offer any solutions to them. This perceived apolitical nature of *A Taste of Honey* has been used by some critics to dismiss the significance and the value of the play, and they have argued that Delaney does not really take a stand in a political sense. However, as mentioned in the theory section of this thesis, hegemony cannot be fought directly, but can only be altered and transformed through subtle resistance. As Delgado and Stefancic point out, “narrative theory teaches that our sense of the world is the product of hundreds and thousands of such stories or narratives, which we use to interpret, construct, and understand our experiences, including new stories and narratives that others offer us”.<sup>145</sup> Such preset ways of thinking and constructing meaning affect the way we assimilate new narratives, especially ones that seem to contradict those which already exist. If these stories are too different from the dominant narrative, they are ignored or dismissed as being marginal and trivial. As Delgado and Stefancic argue, “history shows that one cannot effectively ‘talk back’ against the dominant narrative of one’s day”.<sup>146</sup> The hegemonic view, the dominant narrative, can only be affected in a more indirect way, which is what Delaney is doing with *A Taste of Honey*.

Delaney is not only offering a new narrative on the institution of family, but by questioning the rigid structure of the hegemonic family through various Other-positions, she is also destabilising the construction of nation. As Deborah Chambers suggests, the white nuclear family is a powerful ideological instrument in the attempt to naturalise various traditional hierarchies: “throughout the twentieth century, familialism was used to

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<sup>145</sup> Delgado & Stefancic, p. 218

<sup>146</sup> Delgado & Stefancic, p. 218

mobilise anxieties about national, ethnic and sexual identities and deployed as a powerful myth for organising material reality across lived cultures in Britain by consolidating a biological and racially structured discourse about identity".<sup>147</sup> Family is a key element in the construction of nation, and revealing the family as being a cultural construct rather than something natural would also destabilise the boundaries of the nation. As Homi K. Bhabha writes:

Counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space – representing the nation’s modern territoriality is turned into the archaic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism.<sup>148</sup>

Nations, then, just like families, are imaginary constructs, which depend for their existence on cultural hegemony, and are maintained by creating narratives that support certain hegemonic views and suppress those that question them. Throughout *A Taste of Honey* Delaney offers a counter-narrative that attempts to erase these totalising boundaries by offering an alternative view to these hegemonic ideas.

In *A Taste of Honey* Delaney gives power to the powerless, and voice to the previously voiceless, be they women, homosexuals, blacks, artists, youth, northerners, or working-class people. In many ways these groups were not included in the hegemonic construction of the nation, although they existed within its borders all the same. To the Establishment they represented degeneracy, something unwanted that needed to be hidden and excluded. Much like Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, *A Taste of Honey* tries to expose this societal hypocrisy by pointing out that what is marginal is nonetheless part of the whole. It suggests that instead of holding onto essentialist dreams and trying to dictate what is normal, we should acknowledge pluralism and embrace it.

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<sup>147</sup> Chambers, p. 16

<sup>148</sup> Bhabha, H.K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, p. 149

It should be noted that Delaney was not alone in questioning the construction of the family and depicting a woman's point of view on the role of women within it. Many of Delaney's female contemporaries still remain unrecognised and undervalued, even though they also re-examined the institution of family, and depicted parenthood and family in different manifestations. Playwrights such as Enid Bagnold (*The Chalk Garden*), Doris Lessing (*Play with Tiger*) and Ann Jellicoe (*The Sport of My Mad Mother*), to mention a few, explored womanhood, motherhood and family from a notably "female" point of view. Although these playwrights are often mentioned in discussion of 1950s drama and women's role within it, they have not received as much attention as their male contemporaries, and the role of female playwrights in 1950s drama deserves to be a subject of further study.

In conclusion, instead of trying to attack the hegemonic construction of family and nation directly, or offering solutions on these issues, Delaney subtly destabilises these institutions by presenting us with questions. What is a woman who is not a mother? What is a family that does not have the traditional attributes of a family? What is a man without "masculinity"? A woman without "femininity"? What does it mean to be a man, a woman, an Englishman? And how might redefining all these roles make us redefine the concepts of family and nation? That is perhaps Delaney's greatest gift. Through *A Taste of Honey* she makes us question the basic terminology of our existence and redefines ideas that used to be self-evident, such as race, gender, family, sexuality, class, and nationhood. Perhaps in modern literature and theory these questions are quite prominent and are debated openly. However, Delaney dared to question these ideas at a time when they were essentialised as absolute truths, and through her alternative narrative she helped to pave the way for future changes in the paradigms of family and nation.

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