

Food and Fantasy as Reflection of Female Repression in *Like Water for Chocolate*

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Abstract

Set in Mexico at the turn of the 20th century, Laura Esquivel's contemporary novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, centers on the youngest daughter of the De la Garza family whose familial position destines her to remain at home, unmarried, and in charge of the life-long care of her tyrannical mother. The conflict arises when Tita falls in love and is denied both marriage and influence over her own affairs. Ultimately, Tita negotiates a voice through the elaborate, fantastical recipes she creates, thereby subverting gender suppression by speaking through the stereotypical women's sphere of cooking. These recipes and their fantastic results mirror and reinforce the central theme of the novel, that of suppression of the female voice and its inevitable explosion of expression elsewhere.

Key words: Esquivel; *Like Water for Chocolate*; female repression; patriarchy

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INTRODUCTION

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel interweaves a tale of female repression due to cultural and familial pressure throughout the stereotypical women's

sphere of cooking and romance. However, Esquivel's protagonist, Tita, is capable of "cooking up" more than delightful concoctions; her recipes possess elements of the fantastic. These recipes and their fantastic results mirror and reinforce the central theme of the novel, that of suppression of the female voice and its inevitable explosion of expression elsewhere. Tita's use of her feminine abilities in the kitchen is not without risk. From the beginning of the novel when Mama Elena declares, "You have no opinion about anything that's the end of that!" (17), Tita is forced to subvert Mama Elena's authority by expressing herself through her recipes. Thus Mama Elena's edict is not the end of Tita's opinions, but the beginning.

1. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Set in Mexico at the turn of the 20th century, the novel centers on the Tita, the youngest daughter of the De la Garza family, who is destined to remain at home, unmarried, and in charge of caring for her tyrannical mother, Mama Elena. The conflict arises when Tita falls in love with Pedro who is denied her hand in marriage and ultimately marries Tita's sister, Rosaura. Not completely thwarted by Mama Elena's interdiction, Tita expresses her passion through her recipes, preparing dishes that produce unintended results for all who partake of them.

1.1 Familial Repression

Debra Castillo in the Preface to her collection, *Talking Back* (1992), suggests that "recipe sharing has a sinister as well as a celebratory side. The recipe serves as an index of female creative power" (xiv). Thus Tita's cooking becomes for her not only a method to communicate her inner needs within the repressive familial order which surrounds her, but also serves to reinforce her individual identity as woman. In her work on Indo-Trinidadian fiction and cooking, Brinda Mehta (1999) argues that

“food, as a symbol of communal identification, serves as an indicator of the sexual division of labor that maintains the ‘dynamics of the food politic’ within a society... [and] promotes hierarchical organization of gender relations within the home” (164). Thus, Tita’s assignment to cooking duties defines both her role and her position in the family. Both the plot and subplots are woven together to reinforce and mirror the central theme of gender suppression and the resulting power of subversion. Fiction such as Esquivel’s seems to fall into a pattern of development in Latin American women’s writer which Nora Erro-Peralty and Caridad Silva-Nunez (1991) describe a stage of development which “projects a deep metaphysical quest directed towards an almost constant inquiry into human relationships and into the spiritual and subconscious aspects of universal/female knowledge” (14). Esquivel breaks from traditional narrative and equally from traditional magic realism by anchoring the fantastic in the subconscious of the protagonist. The magic of Tita’s recipe’s arise out of her need to be heard, but they are influenced by the passion of her subconscious.

1.2 Source of Female Repression

It is essential, however, to first look at the source of Tita’s suppression. As the youngest of three daughters born to the De la Garza family, Tita is the one chosen by familial tradition to remain at home, unmarried, in charge of the life-long care of her mother. She is in fact, by her position of birth, an unwilling victim of a harsh tradition, but not one imposed by a patriarchal structure to subjugate women, but by matriarchal imposition. Maite Zubiaurre (2006) suggests that because she is “unable overtly to contravene her mother’s tyrannical caprices, Tita nevertheless finds in her prodigious talent as a cook an implacable (although oblique) instrument of rebellion and empowerment” (32). Through her prowess in the kitchen, Tita effectively subverts Mama Elena’s dictates. Brinda Mehta (2006) suggests that “female power in the kitchen lies in its invisibility, that is, in its ability to transform an unfavorable situation to the advantage of women through their strategies of ‘subservice’ affirmation that guarantees the inclusiveness of a variety of experiences” (161). Thus Tita experiences the passion of her obsession for Pedro through the results of her cooking as it is fostered on those who partake of her passion-infused recipes. The background setting of the Mexican Revolution makes this story of female individualism all the more plausible in light of the expanded role of Mexican women during the Revolution. Santiago Ramirez (1986) describes the role of women during this time as one of unprecedented equality:

During the 1920 Revolution, Mexican men thus became united in new relationships to Mexican women. For the first time in Mexican history, women developed their potentialities on a large scale beside the men and won recognition as companions, mates, and partners. (qtd. in Billings 62)

Tita’s elder sister, the first-born Gertrudis also escapes

her prescribed role to marry and expand the family’s empire, as a result of one of Tita’s recipes. The flame of revolution is ignited in Gertrudis who escapes the family ranch with a rebel soldier, works in a border-town brothel, and eventually returns to the ranch as a “general in the revolutionary army” (165). But it is Mama Elena, the tyrannical, widowed matriarch of the De La Garza clan who is most responsible for the maintenance of the patriarchal structure and the imposition of order. Upon the death of her husband from a heart attack when Tita is only two-days-old, Mama Elena quickly sheds her role as mother and becomes the head of the ranch. Although “Mama Elena’s milk dried up from the shock” (14), she seems only too ready to leave Tita in the capable hands of Nacha, the family’s cook, and to accept her new role:

Mama Elena accepted her offer gratefully; she had enough to do between her mourning and the enormous responsibility of running the ranch—and it was the ranch that would provide her children the food and education they deserved—without having to worry about feeding a newborn baby on top of everything else. (14)

Mama Elena easily assumes the position of patriarchal matriarch. From this point forward, she is described in terms more often related to the authoritarian head of a patriarch structure than to the stereotypical nurturing role of mother. It is also at this point that the reader is told that “Mama Elena felt that the word Mama had a disrespectful sound to it, and so from the time they were little, she had ordered her daughters to use the word ‘mommy’ when speaking to her” (19). Not only does Mama Elena reject the role of mother, she rejects the title also.

1.3 Matriarchal Suppression

Mama Elena’s suppression of Tita is in keeping with her accepted patriarchal role. As Toril Moi argues in *The Feminist Reader* (1989), “patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women” (123), and ironically, it is this patriarchal oppression which Mama Elena enforces. Tita is tutored in the domestic activities of homemaking, sewing, and cooking—all standards of femininity—even though she will never be the matriarch of her own home. Once, when Mama Elena discovers that Tita has sewn perfect stitches, but without first putting in the basting stitch, she tells her to redo the work, “then go rip it out. Baste it and sew it again and then come and show it to me” (18). Tita is also required to meet her familial responsibilities as household cook regardless of circumstance. When Mama Elena forbids Tita’s marriage to Pedro who instead marries her elder sister, Rosaura, Tita is obliged to prepare the wedding banquet, “not that she made any complaints—under her mother’s watchful eye she didn’t dare—but when Mama Elena left the kitchen to go to bed, Tita let out a long sigh” (34). Tita’s femininity is nurtured even as her femaleness or nature is suppressed. Under the strong inflexible influence of her mother, Tita’s need to

speak must be suppressed. Tita can only express herself through the fantastic results of her recipes.

2. FEMALE SUBVERSION

Tita's subversion is on one level productive, in that it allows her to express her voice, both emotionally and sexually, but it is also destructive in that it ultimately expresses the dark side of her subconscious. Julia Kristeva (1989) argues that the nature of power in the hands of women is not radically changed. She argues that:

identification by women with the very power structures previously considered as frustrating, oppressive, or inaccessible has often been used in modern times by totalitarian regimes: the German National-Socialists and the Chilean junta are examples of this. The fact that this is a paranoid type of counter investment in an initially denied symbolic order can perhaps explain this troubling phenomenon; but an explanation does not prevent its massive propagation around the globe, perhaps in less dramatic forms than the totalitarian ones mentioned above, but all moving toward leveling, stabilization, conformism, at the cost of crushing exceptions, experiments, chance occurrences. (206)

2.1 Mama Elena's Revenge

When but a young woman, Mama Elena herself is denied marriage to her lover and is forced into conformity by the established order. The daughter of this liaison is eventually revealed as Gertrudis, Mama Elena's most outwardly rebellious child. Mama Elena was forced to marry Tita's father, and ironically upon his death, she reinforces the same patriarchal order upon her daughters. Tita's only weapon against this repression is her fantastical recipes, believed by Nacha to have been bestowed upon her by the Gods through an infant diet of "corn gruel and teas" (13). Tita's culinary speech not only expresses her love and desire, but also her lust and her need for revenge. The sinister side of Tita's recipes is as inescapable as is her passion for Pedro, her lost lover. Her tears of longing which diluted the meringue made for Rosaura's and Pedro's wedding cake have unexpected consequences for the wedding guests: "the moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing" (42). The fantastic results of her culinary achievement not only reflect her longing for Pedro, but also her revenge toward Pedro's bride, her sister, Rosaura:

But the weeping was just the first symptom of a strange intoxication—an acute attack of pain and frustration—that seized the guests and scattered them across the patio and the grounds and in the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love. Everyone there, every last person fell under this spell, and not very many of them made it to the bathrooms in time—those who didn't joined the collective vomiting that was going on all over the patio. (42)

2.2 Tita's Retribution

Tita, the only person unaffected, garnered her ultimate revenge when Rosaura, her wedding dress defiled by

vomit, is confronted by Pedro, who "proposes they leave the consummation of the nuptials for another night" (40). Rosaura and her wedding guests are not the only victims of Tita's unabashed power. In a sad irony, Macha, Tita's surrogate mother, is found dead, "her eyes wide open, medicinal leaves upon her temples, a picture of her fiancé clutched in her hands" (47). Although Tita is able to speak through her recipes, the power that she unleashes is beyond her control.

Instead of ending their relationship upon the wedding of Pedro and Rosaura, Tita and Pedro continue their covert love affair of stolen caresses out of the sight of the condemning eyes of Mama Elena and the trusting eyes of Rosaura. Each recipe from Tita's imagination becomes an expression of her unrequited passion; the resulting fantastic outcome not limited to her conscious longing, but to the deeper expression of her subconscious.

Her recipe for March, "quail in rose petal sauce" (49), is made from the petals of a bouquet of roses whose thorns pricked Tita's fingers, causing her blood to taint the petals. This recipe, ingested by Gertrudis, turns Gertrudis into the medium through which a sexual liaison between Tita and Pedro is consummated: "with that meal it seemed they had discovered a new system of communication in which Tita was the transmitter, Pedro the receiver, and poor Gertrudis the medium, the conducting body through which the singular sexual message was passed" (53). However pleasurable this experience is for Tita and Pedro, it results in the albeit welcomed abduction of Gertrudis by a soldier of the Revolution, her introduction to prostitution, and her banishment from the family until after her mother's death.

It is substantially only Tita's passion which acts upon the recipes to produce their fantastic results. Even though Tita is able to act as a wet nurse to Rosaura and Pedro's first child, Roberto, her recipe for hot chocolate, intended to help Rosaura produce sufficient breast milk, does nothing to enable Rosaura to nurse her own child, eventually resulting in the child's death after Pedro and Rosaura relocate to San Antonio, forced there by Mama Elena's attempt to separate Tita from Pedro.

None of Tita's recipes has the power to produce fantastic results except those where passion is the motivation. When Tita learns that Rosaura's second child, a daughter ironically named Esperanza (translation: Hope), is destined to remain her own mother's caretaker fulfilling the same role as Tita, her fury is unbridled:

If only Rosaura had burned her mouth to a crisp! And had never let those words leak out, those foul, filthy, frightful, repulsive, revolting, unreasonable words. Better to have swallowed them and kept them deep in her bowels until they were putrid and worm eaten. If only she [Tita] would live long enough to prevent her sister from carrying out such a dire intention. (141)

2.3 Subversive Nature of Passion

It is at this point, at the height of her anger that Tita is described as being literally, "like water for chocolate"

(141) or at her emotional *boiling point*. Tita's boiling passion is two-fold. First she is consumed by her passionate love for Pedro and second by her abhorrence of the family tradition which Rosaura seems intent upon fostering on her own daughter, Esperanza. Although it is her passion for Pedro which causes her to reject Dr. John Brown, an American doctor who has helped her understand her internal passion, it is her second passionate hatred of Rosaura's decision which is ultimately fulfilled by Tita's recipes—her wish for Rosaura to swallow her horrid and putrid words:

For some weeks now, she had been having serious digestive problems; she suffered from flatulence and bad breath. Rosaura felt so distressed by these upheavals that she had determined that she and Pedro should sleep in separate bedrooms. (158)

Tita's wish-filled recipe not only results in her sister's distress, but also in Tita's unencumbered access to Pedro. Eventually, even though futile preparations continue for Tita's marriage to Dr. Brown, the tension between Rosaura and Tita continues to build until Rosaura confronts Tita with the growing evidence of her forbidden liaison with Pedro. Tita openly declares her love for Pedro and her disdain for Rosaura's continuation of the familiar tradition of near enslavement of the youngest daughter, in this case, her beloved niece, Esperanza. Their argument ends with another of Tita's wishes: "Esperanza was one of the things Tita loved most in the world. The anguish she felt! As she tore apart the last little piece of tortilla left in her hand, she wished with all her heart that her sister would be swallowed up by the earth. That was the least she deserved!" (196). The wish is immediately reflected in the barnyard squabble between two chickens who begin pecking at one another. An obvious parallel to Tita and Rosaura, the barnyard fight slowly escalates into a violent conflagration which takes on elements of the fantastic:

Soon the chickens were inescapably trapped by the force they themselves were generating in their mad chase; they couldn't break loose from that whirl of feathers, blood, and dust that spun faster and faster, gathering force at every turn until it changed into a mighty tornado, destroying everything in its path, starting with the things that were closest—in this case, Esperanza's diapers, hanging on the patio clothesline. (197)

The fight continues until the earth magically opens up and swallows the chickens, the diapers, and most of the patio, leaving Tita a stunned observer. Eventually, this scene is mirrored by the burial of Rosaura when the earth is opened to receive her body who dies of severe indigestion, caused unintentionally by Tita's earlier desire for Rosaura to eat her ugly words. Eventually Tita is united with Pedro in death, but not through her own recipes, but through Dr. Brown's creation of matches which Tita enthusiastically ingests following Pedro's death, thereby freeing her to fully pursue her passionate love of Pedro as well as triumphantly releasing her from the familial restraints of her earthly existence.

CONCLUSION

Esquivel's novel succeeds in expressing both the patriarch suppression of the female voice and interestingly the subsequent matriarchal support of that suppression when enhanced by unbridled, seemingly limitless power of the mother. Both Mama Elena and Tita are in a way victims of their own power. Kristeva (1989) argues that in situations where "women, promoted to decision-making positions, suddenly obtain the economic as well as the narcissistic advantages refused to them for thousands of years and become . . . the guardians of the status quo, [they also becomes] the most zealous protectors of the established order" (205). Mama Elena assumes the position of power upon the death of her husband, yet continues the patriarchal structure becoming in essence a patriarchal matriarch. Tita, whose nature is suppressed, develops the power to subvert Mama Elena's oppression of her nature, yet is unable to use her power to free herself from her familial role. Thus in Esquivel's novel, female repression is enacted by woman upon woman. In *Laugh of the Medusa* (1986), Cixous writes:

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an anti-narcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of anti-love. (310).

Ultimately Esquivel's novel of gender suppression and the resulting power of subversion is her attempt to speak, as Cixous (1986) would suggest, "as woman, toward woman . . . in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their significant meaning in history" (308). Women, forced into silence through class, wealth, or position, are capable, as Tita demonstrates, of negotiating a voice by whatever elaborate, fantastic means available at their disposal.

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