

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: FOOD IMAGERY IN LAURA ESQUIVEL LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE

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Abstract

For feminists, the kitchen is a symbol of the world of traditionally marginalized woman. It is a space that associated with repetitive work, lacking any "real" creativity, and having no possibility for the fulfilment of women's existential needs, individualization or self-expression. Latin American women writer Laura Esquivel through her debut novel Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies (Como agua para chocolate: Novela de entregas mensuales con recetas, amores y remedios caseros) expresses a different, quite parodic and critical gender perspective that women can use food as a path to power and a part of a cultural cauldron involving sensuality and machismo. This paper is focuses on how food imagery is particularly important in the novel as a voice for women and their abundant emotions.

Keywords: *Creativity, Power, Individuality, Existential Needs, Self-Expression, Gender, Sensuality*

Food is an integral part of one's culture and the means of creating and affecting one's identity. Food is used in various contexts in literature and touch upon various issues such as questions of gender, identities, ethnicities, cultures, politics and power, interpersonal and social relations, and many more. Food imagery has been used in literature throughout the ages, scholars have recently begun to study texts for the significance behind the foods and eating. The interest in this theme is rooted in the second wave of feminist criticism of Simon Di Beaviour which started to look into gender distinctions in culture and literature, and to look for food imagery to address gender issues. In Brad Kessler (2005) insists, "Food in fiction engages all the reader's senses (taste, touch, feel, sight, and smell)". The importance and the frequent employment of food imagery, whether literal or figurative, is clarified by Blodgett (2004) that "Cooking, broadly conceived as female context, appears to offer some persuasive explanation why women may be drawn to food imagery". Laura Esquivel through her debut novel *Like Water for Chocolate: A Novel in Monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies* uses lush and sensual images of food and cooking to articulate the strong emotions of a woman. *Like Water for Chocolate* reveals how the food

can become a nurturing and creative domain, providing sustenance and pleasure for others; a site for repression, where one can be confined exclusively to domestic tasks and lose or be denied a sense of self; and a site for rebellion against traditional boundaries.

This novel centred on relationship between food, family ties, Mexican tradition and gender through Tita De la Garza, a young Mexican woman whose family's kitchen becomes her world after her mother forbids her to marry the man she loves. Esquivel chronicles Tita's life from her teenage to middle-age years, as she submits to and eventually rebels against her mother's domination. The novel is an imaginative mix of recipes, home remedies, tradition and love story set in Mexico in the early part of the century. It brought a picture of confined Latin women also. In the patriarchal society of the early part of the twentieth century a Latin woman's place is in the home especially in their traditional castle and dungeon of Kitchen and bedroom. She was expected to serve their fathers and brothers and after marriage their husbands and children. So women have confined only to domestic arts such as cooking, sewing, and interior decoration as a part of their creativity, along with storytelling, gossip, and advice. Thereby they create their own female culture within the social prison of married life. Another Mexican tradition is that the youngest daughter cannot marry in order to take care of her mother in her old age. This novel is Laura Esquivel's recognition of such a confined world and its language comes from her Mexican heritage of fiercely independent women, who created a woman's culture within the social prison of marriage.

The structuring of Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel as "A Novel in Monthly Installments with Recipes, Romances, and Home Remedies," as it is subtitled, incorporates recipes into the book in order to tell a story. These recipes, however, are not only formulas, but they are memories and traditions being passed down from generation to generation. Tita becomes the focus of her family because she is most closely connected with food preparation. This closeness to the food is seen from her birth depicted in the the first chapter of the book.

Tita made her entrance into this world, prematurely, right there on the kitchen table amid the smells of simmering noodle soup, thyme, bay leaves, and cilantro, steamed milk, garlic, and of course, onion. (1).

She is born on her family's kitchen table, amid the fragrant and pungent odors of cooking. Tita's mother, Mama Elena, is unable to nurse her because of her immense sorrow happened by her husband's death, Nacha, the family's cook, takes over the task of feeding her. From that day on, Tita's domain was the kitchen and the joy of living for her was wrapped up in the delights of food. It reflect through these lines

Sometimes she would cry for no reason at all, like when Nancha chopped onions, but since they both knew the cause of those tears, they didn't pay them much mind. They made them a source of entertainment, so that during her childhood Tita didn't distinguish between tears of laughter and tears of sorrow. (2)

After her mother refuses to allow her to marry the man she loves, Tita channels her frustrated desires into the creation of delicious meals that often have strange effects on her family. Through the expression of her culinary art, Tita learns to cope with her subordinate status that is, role as a cook that marks in the family and finally she is able to overcome her subjugation by injecting powerful emotions into her culinary creations which she uses to nurture good and destroy evil. Employing the technique of magic realism, Esquivel has created a bitter-sweet tale of love and loss to a compelling exploration of a woman's search for identity and fulfilment.

The novel's twelve chapters is in a diary instalment form, written one per month , were the narrator chronicles the life of her great-aunt, Tita De la Garza, and relate details from over two decades of Tita's life, beginning in 1910, when she is fifteen years old, and ending with her death at thirty-nine. Each chapter begins with a new recipe that Tita prepares for her family during this period. These recipes evoke memories of different events in Tita's life. Certain dishes are prepared at certain times of the year or for special occasions. In the words and ingredients of the recipes themselves lies the formula to produce a particular dish. Whether it be dinner rolls, wedding cake or sausages, the dish's sole being relies on the recipes. In a sense, the recipe is the first step in a chain reaction to triggering a memory. After the food is produced, it has a texture, smell, shape, taste and colour unlike the others. These elements arouse the senses, which can trigger emotions. This organization, along with the matter-of-fact weaving of recipes and remedies into the fabric of the narrative, underscores the fact that the novel offers substantial opportunities for feminist analysis.

Throughout the novel food is used as a symbol to represent different events.

Food as a means of communication and transferral

Food is used as a metaphor for communication and transferral is a common theme in this novel. 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". Tita uses food to convey her emotions to others and transforms unfavorable situations in her life to a favourable one. The medium of food solidifies abstract feelings in Tita's world, and Tita is able to resort to expressing her feelings through the creation of delicacy in the limited area of kitchen. She translates food into a new language in the kitchen. Tita's recipes are always related to different incidents happening in her time. Here, cooking is Tita's way of telling what she cannot vocalize

The liberation through food and cooking is not limited to Tita alone, but also occurs for the people who consume her meals. In Tita's territory, her emotions evoked by personal experience are also transferred to others through food. She feels and she makes others feel through the food . Through a cake, she communicates her longing and sadness to Rosaura and Pedro's wedding guests. While Tita and Nacha are making the wedding cake for Rosaura's marriage to Pedro, her mind is full of sorrow because she can no longer hide her outrage at

her sister marrying Tita's boyfriend. Tita's mother will not tolerate any outburst and warns her to behave. She has no other way to express her sadness. As she prepares the cake, her sorrow over the impending marriage causes her tears to fall into the batter and icing. The tears affect everyone at the wedding banquet with longing and remorse for lost loves, so much so that they become physically sick.

The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing, Even Pedro, usually so proper, was having trouble holding back his tears. Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently. 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. (16)

Thus Tita does not revolt through words, but through food she carries the best she can. Thereby she communicated her sadness through that dish to the guests.

The meal of rose petals and quail also intensifies the passion between Tita and Pedro and initiates a new system of communication between them that will help sustain their love while they are physically separated. She communicates her passion to Pedro; through a rose petal sauce prepared using rose flowers which Pedro gifted her. Even though their love is forbidden, the passion is still alive for Tita and Pedro. Tita communicates to him through the dishes she cooks. She uses the petals of the roses Pedro gifted her, to cook the rose petal sauce so that, as he consumes it, he is also consuming her.

It was as if a strange alchemical process had dissolved her entire being in the rose petal sauce, in the tender flesh of the quails, In the Wine, in every one of the meal's aromas That was the way she entered Pedro's body, hot, voluptuous, perfumed, totally sensuous. (21)

This clearly shows the communication of Tita's emotion through food. It is a form of sexual transubstantiation whereby the rose petal sauce and the quail have been turned into the body of Tita and Pedro.

But the curious thing is that the emotion Tita communicated to Pedro through the dish effected on her other sister, Gertrudis. Gertrudis begins to sweat and imagines one of Pancho villa's soldiers she had seen in the town square last week and she elopes with him. 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. It is not simply a matter of food sustaining life. Food nourishes not only the body but also passion. It transmits emotions and sustains culture. Tita's special character as nurturer is communicated through the food she prepares. She also provides food from her body for Rosaura's baby, despite never having given birth. But her food does not merely sustain physical life but it transmits her emotions and carries the culture forward, even into the next two generations.

Laura Esquivel skillfully used food as a metaphor for communication because it is a part of tradition that Mexicans prepare different dishes for certain occasions to communicate their emotions. For example, a tradition for a wealthy Mexican family is what is called a country gathering. This is a gathering of family members. At this gathering, they began with a breakfast of fruit, eggs, beans, chilaquiles, coffee, milk, and pastries. They would then go out on horseback after their typical breakfast. Some of the holidays that they make special dishes for include: Dia de la Candelaria, day of the dead, and Christmas. Dia de la Candelaria is the day that marks the end of the Christmas season. On this day, it is a tradition to eat tamales and drink atole, a drink that goes with tamales and is made from cornstarch. This is not the only part of this tradition but it is what most Mexican's think of when they think of this day. The traditional Christmas Eve meal is usually turkey and other Mexican foods that go with it (Mexican Culture). Different dishes are also used for events such as pregnancy, sickness, marriage, and almost any event that could happen in a person's life and through this they communicate and transfer their emotions

Food as a symbol of the female bonding and creativity

Tita found an outlet for her suppressed emotions through her creative remedies and recipes. She changed kitchen from a place of drudgery to an artist's workshop. It is the kitchen which offers Tita an area of "unrestricted freedom" to escape from Mama Elena's tyranny. In the kitchen, Tita is given a free voice to express herself, a territoriality for creativity. Mama Elena tries to control everything of Tita, restricting her from marriage according to the old convention that the youngest daughter should care for mother till death. But her power is limited outside the kitchen. Due to the lack of culinary experience, she never tells Tita what to cook and how to cook, so cooking provides "an outlet for the creativity Mama Elena is always restraining. So here Tita finds "a means of self-definition and survival". The recipe that is made in each chapter is selected based on what happened in the chapter. For eg: Tita prepares turkey mole for Roberto's baptism (26). Then later on in the novel to help Tita's "sickness" (55), Chenchu prepares ox-tail soup to cure what no medicines had been able to cure. By placing an actual recipe at the beginning of each chapter, the author is reinforcing the importance of food to the narrative. This structure thus connects to the female bonding and creativity that can emerge within a focus on the culinary arts. The forces of love and passion conflict with Tita's desire to fulfill her responsibilities toward her mother. In obeying her mother, Tita must suppress her feelings for Pedro. Her sister Gertrudis, on the other hand, allows herself to freely express her passion when she runs off with Juan and soon begins work at a brothel. Tita's and Gertrudis's passionate natures also emerge through their enjoyment of food. Both relish good meals, although Tita is the only one who knows how to prepare one. At one point, Gertrudis brings the revolutionary army to the De la Garza ranch so she can sample her sister's hot chocolate, cream fritters, and other recipes. The food analogy also applies to the love of John Brown for Tita. Although he is captivated by her beauty, he feels no passionate jealousy over her relationship with Pedro. He comes from a North American family where the food, as Tita finds, "is bland and didn't appeal." (48)

Tita takes her time in preparing each dish and makes sure to follow each recipe or formula carefully. Yet ironically, Tita's passion for Pedro, her lost love, and her independent spirit find a creative and rebellious outlet in this same domestic realm. While Mama Elena successfully represses Tita's public voice, she cannot quell the private expression of her emotion. Tita subconsciously redefines her domestic space, transforming it from a site of repression into one of expression when she is forced to prepare her sister's wedding dinner. Till time her creativity results in an act of retribution. As she completes the wedding cake, her sorrow over Rosaura's impending marriage to Pedro causes her tears to spill into the icing. This alchemic mixture affects the entire wedding party:

"The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing.... Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently. 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." (16)

Thus Tita's creativity effectively, if not purposefully, ruins her sister's wedding.

Even though Tita remains confined to the kitchen, her creative preparation of the family's meals continues to serve as a vehicle for her love for Pedro and his children, and thus as an expression of her rebellion against her mother's efforts to separate them. The kitchen becomes a paradoxical symbol in the novel. On the one hand, it is a place where Tita is confined exclusively to domestic tasks, a place that threatens to deny her a sense of identity. Yet it is also a nurturing and creative domain, providing Tita with an outlet for her passions and providing others with sustenance and pleasure.

Food as a path of dominance

Laura used food also as a path of dominance in this novel. Even in the first part, Tita spoils her sister's feast through her tears is a kind of her dominance she reflected through food. The somatic reaction provoked by Tita's bodily fluids (tears) actually shows how the Tita undermines the mother's authority and prohibition. Tita and Mama Elena sitting around the table making sausages together when Chenchu enters the scene weeping to tell them of the death of Rosaura's and Pedro's infant son Roberto. When Tita starts to cry, Mama Elena states, "I don't want tears," (56) denying the association of emotions with food (and repeating the words she uttered when she ordered Tita to cook Rosaura's wedding feast). When Tita leaps up from the table, crying out in anger against her mother, Mama Elena rises and hits her full force in the face with a spoon. This shows that Mama Elena uses food as a path to dominance, not as a form of nurturing or emotional connection.

The kitchen also becomes an outlet for Tita's repressed passion for Pedro. After Pedro gives Tita a bouquet of pink roses, Tita clutches them to her chest so tightly, "that when she got to the kitchen, the roses, which had been mostly pink, had turned quitered from the blood that was flowing from her hands and breasts." (18) She then creates a sauce from these stained petals that she serves over quail. The dish elicits a unique response from

each member of her family that reflects and intensifies hidden desires or the lack thereof Pedro "couldn't help closing his eyes in voluptuous delight," This shows her dominance through food.

The most startling response comes from Tita's other sister, Gertrudis, who responds to the food as an aphrodisiac. Unable to bear the heat emanating from her body, Gertrudis runs from the table, tears off her clothes, and attempts to cool herself in the shower. Her body radiates so much heat, however, that the wooden walls of the shower "split and burst into flame." (57) Her perfumed scent carries across the plain and attracts a revolutionary soldier, who swoops her up, naked, onto his horse and rides off with her, freeing her, if not her sister, from Mama Elena's oppression. Private and public worlds merge as Gertrudis escapes the confinements of her life on the farm and begins a journey of self-discovery that results in her success as a revolutionary general. Even though Tita remains confined to the kitchen, her creative preparation of the family's meals continues to serve as a vehicle for her love for Pedro, and thus as an expression of her rebellion against her mother's efforts to separate the two. Her cooking also continues to exact retribution against those who have contributed to her suffering

Food as the symbol of positive and negative, good and evil meanings

Food is used as the symbol of positive and negative, good and evil meanings and these contrasting meanings of food are at the heart of the novel *Like Water for Chocolate*. It centres on women's oft-ignored experiences in the domestic sphere, especially in the kitchen. Laura emphasis that food is a voice for women, that feeding is powerful when filled with emotions, and that food is an important repository of female traditions that are critical to cultural survival. Mama Elena bad, "stepmotherly" mother of Tita adopts a patriarchal stance towards the kitchen; like men she does not cook but rather compels others to cook for her. Mama Elena immediately asserts despotic power in the family and decrees that Tita will never marry but must follow family tradition and serve her until she dies. She banishes Tita to the kitchen which is considered as symbol of their powerlessness and low status and forbids her from marrying the handsome Pedro with whom she shares passionate love. Mama Elena tries to subordinate Tita's autonomous will by cruel repression in the kitchen, but Tita fights back with food.

With the creation of a new food item, actually a centre is created. The centre is the substructure which other elements are built. Here in this novel, Esquivel associates certain dishes to love, lust, sickness, pregnancy, motherhood, and the supernatural. Whoever controls the food appears also to control all those emotions. Tita is seen as the strong woman in the family. It is not a coincidence that Esquivel places the novel during the time of the Mexican Revolution (1910). Historically, many women participated in this war and women had been participating since 1519, during the Spanish Conquest. This is interesting because Tita is very much a *soldadera*—a female soldier—herself, similar to Toci. Toci is the oldest of the Earth Mother Goddesses from the Valley of Mexico. Food is also a means of transferring family

history. The structure of the work relies largely on food as a means to narrate the memories and lives of the De la Garza family. Finally, the kitchen is a site of birth, heritage, and nourishment. There, children are born, raised, and fed, and the family recipes and stories are passed down to future generations .

Food as an expression of intense emotions

In addition to serving as a central organizing principle, food is often a direct cause of physical and emotional unrest, and serves as a medium through which emotions can be transmitted. The title "Like water for (hot) chocolate" itself expresses the emotion hidden in Tita's mind .The title is a Mexican expression that literally means water at the boiling point and figuratively means intense emotions on the verge of exploding into expression. Throughout the novel, Tita's passion for Pedro is "like water for chocolate" but is constantly repressed by her dictatorial mother. When Pedro gives Tita a rose she uses it to cook a meal. As everybody eats the food they begin feel the effect of it and everybody becomes extremely loving and lustful

It is not simply a matter of food sustaining life. Food nourishes not only the body but also passion. It transmits emotions and sustains culture. Tita prepares most of the food in the novel, and she uses food to express her emotions because her lowly cultural status affords her no other opportunity to do so. The vomiting and moroseness at Rosaura's wedding results from the guests' eating the cake that bears Tita's tears shows the reflection of her intense emotions. Likewise, the sexual frenzy that compels Gertrudis to leave the ranch is occasioned by the transmission of Tita's passion for Pedro into the dish she prepares for dinner. These incidents suggest a simultaneous commodification and uncontrollability of emotion; food is a potent force in the world of the novel, and it lets Tita assert her identity.

Thus we can conclude that through this novel Laura Esquivel shows how Food and eating symbolize the issues of acceptance, resistance, as well as symbols of memory, emotions, relationships, power, and consumption. The narrative structure helps put the focus on the food, which not only symbolizes the emotions the characters and feeling but also connects multiple aspects of the story. The recipes Laura exhibits through this novel reveals Tita's subconscious also . She is only subconsciously aware of what she is doing while preparing the food. Esquivel uses magical realism to express some of the emotions that Tita puts into her cooking—allowing them to assume a visible form which is more easily expressed-- which will be discussed more in depth. The hidden ingredients are encrypted into Tita's subconscious partially through Nancha. Although Nancha is the family cook and nanny, she is the mother figure in Tita's life. She raises Tita in the kitchen. After all, Tita was born in the kitchen on a flood of tears caused by her mother chopping onions while preparing dinner. Through all of the years she spent in the kitchen, she was unconsciously building a complex relationship with food. Preparing dishes became more of an experience than a necessity to survive. This idea is expressed more in depth in the article, "Romancing the Cook," by Susan Lucas Dobrian (1996). Dobrian describes meal preparation as the following:

The kitchen becomes a veritable reservoir of creative and magical events, in which the cook who possesses this talent becomes artist, healer, and lover. Culinary activity involves not just the combination of prescribed ingredients, but something personal and creative emanating from the cook, a magical quality which transforms the food and grants its powerful properties that go beyond physical satisfaction to provide spiritual nourishment as well.

Thus Laura Esquivel done a marvellous job of using food as a metaphor for unexpressed emotions and takes the aching soul of a young girl and turns it into a cookbook of feelings and emotions cleverly disguised with food.

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