

## **Cooking As Metaphor Of The Solitary Voice Of Women With Respect To Laura Esquivel's Like Water For Chocolate**

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**ABSTRACT:** Laura Esquivel presents a totally different aspect of women's voice through her book Like Water for Chocolate (LWC). The plight of Mexican women in the novel is almost similar to the others the world over. It is through the metaphor of cooking and food that the story is revealed to the readers. A solitary voice from a Mexican kitchen which is silent, but intense is how the author presents. This article is about the uniqueness of the theme in a changing scenario where folk culture is almost forgotten in this world. The women's voice reflected will be explored on the basis of the metaphor of cooking.

**Keywords:** *women, kitchen, culture, cooking, morality, tradition.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Mexican author Laura Esquivel gained international reputation through her first novel, *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (1989) translated as *Like Water for Chocolate (LWS)*. Born and raised in Mexico, she had written LWC with the hope of portraying to her readers some Spanish background and history. This novel has suspense, emotion and tradition that present the reader with a sense of knowledge of all the hardships that Mexican women once went through and a better understanding of the pain that love can cause.

In a style that is epic in scope yet intensely personal and in focus LWC tells the story of Tita De La Garza, the youngest daughter in a family living in Mexico at the turn of the twentieth century. The novel follows Tita's life from birth to death, focusing mostly on her tortured relationship with Pedro and her struggle followed by the eventual triumph in pursuit of love and individuality. The characters are set against the backdrop of one of the modernizing forces in Mexican history, the Mexican revolution of 1910 – 1917. Esquivel uses the revolution to explore the themes of masculinity and gender identity and the revolution's goal of liberty. Through twelve chapters, each marked as a "monthly installment" and thus labeled with the months of the year, Esquivel presents before us Tita's struggle to pursue true love and gain her independence.

Esquivel provides a verbal image of the Mexican rural, middle-class women, who must be strong and far cleverer than the men who supposedly protect her. She must be pious, observing all the religious requirements of a virtuous daughter, wife and mother and she must exercise great care to keep her sentimental relations as private as possible. Most important of all, she must be in control of the life in her house, which means essentially the kitchen and bed room and food and sex. In Esquivel's novel there are four women who demonstrate the model: Mama Elena, and her three daughters Rosaura, Gertrudis and Josephita (Tita).

*Like Water for Chocolate* is written in a unique style; it combines elements of a cook book and a romance novel and is actually a parody of both genres. The book relates to the story of Josefita (Tita) De La Garza, the third and youngest daughter of Mama Elena, a widow. In this novel, the protagonist named Tita is forbidden to wed because she is the youngest daughter. Esquivel invents a tradition which forbids the youngest daughter from marrying, as she is supposed to remain with her mother as the caregiver until her mother's death. She is depicted as strong, self reliant, absolutely tyrannical with her daughters and servants, especially with Tita, who from birth has been designated as the one who will not marry because she must take care of her mother until she dies. Mama Elena believes in order, i.e. her order. Although she observes the strictures of church and society, she has secretly had an adulterous love affair with an African-American, and her second daughter Gertrudis is the offspring of that relationship. This transgression of the norms of proper behavior remains hidden from public view; only after her mother's death does Tita discover that Gertrudis is her half – sister. The tyranny imposed on the three sisters is therefore the rigid, self-designed model of women's life pitilessly enforced by Mama Elena, and each of the three responds in her own way.

*Rosaura never questions her mother's authority and follows her dictates submissively; after she married, she becomes an insignificant imitation of her mother. She lacks the strength, skill and determination of her mother and tries to compensate by appealing to the mother's model as absolute. She therefore tries to live the model, invoking her mother's authority because she has none of her own. This is evident in her refusal for the marriage of her daughter Esperanza and Alex, Dr. John Brown's son, in the same way as her mother opposed the marriage of Tita and Pedro saying that according to tradition, the youngest daughter was not supposed to marry and look after her mother till death.*

*Gertrudis does not challenge her mother but instead responds to her emotions and passions in a direct manner unbecoming a lady. This physical directness leads her to adopt an androgynous lifestyle. She leaves home and her mother's authority, escapes from the brothel where she subsequently landed and becomes a general of the revolutionary army, taking a subordinate as her lover and later, her husband.*

*Though Tita speaks against her mother's arbitrary rule, she cannot escape until she temporarily loses her mind. She is able to survive her mother's harsh rule by transferring her love, joy, sadness and anger into her cooking. Tita's emotions and passions are the impetus for expression and action, not through the normal means of communication, but through the food she prepares. She is therefore able to consummate her love with Pedro and also seek vengeance by inducing sadness and acute physical discomfort to those who hate her through the food she serves. The best example is the wedding feast that she prepares. Mama Elena fixes the wedding between Rosaura, Tita's eldest sister, and Pedro, Tita's lover. She refuses Tita's hand to Pedro holding on to tradition. As an additional torture, she forces Tita to make the wedding cake. During the preparation of the cake, Tita's tears fall into the batter and her sorrow and remorse were magically transferred into the cake when Nacha bakes it. The result is disastrous – when the guests eat the cake, they sob uncontrollably, become violently ill and rush home.*

*The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing...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 into the bathrooms, all of them wailing over lost love. Everyone there, every last person, fell under this spell... only one person escaped: the cake had no effect on Tita. (39).*

*The book is divided into twelve sections named after the months of the year. Each section begins with a recipe involving Mexican food. The chapters outline the preparation of the dish and tie it to an event in the protagonist's life. In LWC food or recipes act as a cultural marker that helps to reveal or explore the Mexican culture, tradition, history, etc. Food equals memory and memory equals immortality. In the recipes we pass down from generation to generation, we reawaken the past and make the present more real. In the novel, food is about history – with handed down recipes, the chef (here, the narrator) can remember the past. The unique point of view in LWC helps to convey the significance of the narrative. Esperanza, Tita's niece, finds her aunt's cookbook in the ruins of the De La Garza ranch. As she recreates the recipes in her own home, she passes down the family stories to her daughter, who becomes the novel's narrator. The themes of passion, familial insubordination, dictatorial governance and romance are not new in fiction; but communicating these themes through family life on the ranch, using magic realism and monthly recipes as metaphors is something innovative.*

*Tita's magical powers are all related to food, with the exception of the kilometer-long bedspread she knits during her lengthy nights of insomnia. Tita's cooking controls the pattern of living of those in her household because the food she prepares becomes an extension of herself. A recurring symbol in LWC is food. Food is a major part of the story, and it is somewhat obvious as the title itself is about food. The title is a Mexican expression that refers to the making of hot chocolate: water is used instead of milk, and should be brought to a vigorous boil. Therefore an extremely agitated person is said to be "like water for chocolate", so is a person in a state of sexual arousal.*

*Esquivel may place Tita in the kitchen, the stereotypical female domestic space, but the author redefines both Tita's culinary skills and this female domain. Rather than reducing meal preparation to an innate knowledge divined by all true women, the kitchen becomes a veritable reservoir of creative and magical events, in which the cook who possess 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 it powerful properties that go beyond physical satisfaction to provide spiritual nourishment as well. Artist and art become one and the same as Tita's tears, breast milk, and blood, channel emotional properties into the food she prepares.*

Tita's kitchen is not depicted as a "worthless space" but as a refuge, a place where solace and freedom are possible. The kitchen grants the protagonist a refuge from her mother's tyrannical demands by allowing her to establish meaningful relationships with the old Indian servant Nacha, a symbolic "keeper of tradition". Although Tita and Nacha belong to different social spheres, in the kitchen they create a lasting bond. Nacha allows Tita what her own mother has denied her, the freedom to express her creativity through cooking. It is in this space under the benevolent direction of Nacha, that Tita begins to defy the norms. Gradually the freedom Tita experiences heals her wounded psyche and allows her to validate her personal worth when she realizes that she is an indispensable member of society. The protagonist's independence is signaled by small, almost invisible acts directed to challenge her mother's authority. Unwittingly, Mama Elena has placed a powerful weapon at Tita's disposal: an indispensable social and cultural element, food. Cooking empowers the protagonist over those who had until that time, controlled her life. It allows her to re-enact a "ritual". Tita will draw power and strength from an apparently implausible, food.

The kitchen protects Tita from Mama Elena and Rosaura's interference and enables her personal and spiritual transformation. The first step towards this is that Tita master Nacha's recipes. Kitchen and recipes are significant not only because they obviously belong to an ancient cultural legacy, but also because they are permeated with mythical, mystic and magical connotations that signal strange events and long-forgotten rituals. Tita's association with Nacha, grants her admission into a world whose rituals and beliefs can be traced back to Mexico's pre-hispanic past. Their associations with food link both women to a unique form of "feminine liturgy" whose cryptic formulas are seldom understood by outsiders. Unlike Tita, Gertrudis and Rosaura are bereft of any culinary talents. This is well exemplified in Rosaura's attempt to cook which was an utter failure.

... there was one day when Rosaura did attempt to cook. When Tita tried nicely to give her some advice, Rosaura became irritated and asked her to leave the kitchen. The rice was obviously scorched, the meat dried out, the dessert burned. But no one at the table dared to display the tiniest hint of displeasure, not after Mama Elena had pointedly remarked, 'As for the first meal Rosaura has cooked it isn't bad. Don't you agree Pedro?'... of course that afternoon, the entire family felt sick to their stomachs. (48).

The novelist seems to believe that recipes also consist of what could be described as "hidden ingredients". These ingredients could consist of love, patience, sorrow or a respect for tradition. These ingredients come out only after the food is prepared and eaten. These hidden ingredients are encrypted not only in the recipes, but also in Tita's subconscious. Through the years she spent in the kitchen, she was unconsciously building a complex relationship with food. The food that she cooks has profound influence on the other characters who consume it; she is able to transmit her emotions into preparations and these emotions are experienced by those who consume it. In chapter eleven, there is an instance of a chicken fight. All the chickens on the ranch enter into a wild frenzy, after eating the food provided by an 'angry' Tita that ultimately leads to a bloody fight and even a tornado; the reason is that Tita's anger is transferred to them through the food that she gave them. This is mainly because Tita understands food and has an amazing ability to express herself, both literally and metaphorically, through her cooking. A good example of how prevalent food is in Tita's psyche is exemplified in the following quote, in which even her first meeting with Pedro is described in terms relating to food.

... when she first felt his hot gaze burning her skin. She turned her head, and her eyes met Pedro's. It was then she understood how dough feels when plunged into boiling oil. The heat that invaded her body was so real she was afraid she would start to bubble... (18).

In LWC food acts as a metaphor, an object and a means of expressing a range of human emotions. Laura Esquivel has made use of the metaphor of food in another of her work, **Between the Fires** (2000) that feature essays on life, love and food. Other writers like Preethi Nair, the famous Indo- Anglian writer in her **One Hundred Shades of White**, and Margaret Attwood, a major figure in contemporary feminist writing in her **Edible Woman** have made use of food as a symbol and metaphor. Food as a sign is a universally accepted fact and is a cultural synonym. Writers all over the world had used the semiotics of food and cooking as a method of exploring human emotions and relationships.

Thus LWC shows how food acts as a metaphor that reveals the culture, the language, the emotions of the characters etc.

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