

**THE ECHOING KITCHEN: ARTICULATING FEMALE
EMPOWERMENT AND ETHNIC IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH
COOKING IN LAURA ESQUIVEL'S *LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE***

Ms. Poushali Chakraborty

Assistant Professor
Head of the Department, English
Nathaniyal Murmu Memorial College,
Dakshin Dinajpur – 733127
West Bengal, India

Abstract

Recent scholarship shows how feminist activism has gained a strong impetus through food politics. *Like Water for Chocolate*, by Laura Esquivel, in its hybridised narration, offers an olfactory appeal, and is *edible per se*. This paper attempts to show how the kitchen in *Like Water for Chocolate*, as a centripetal site is fictionalised and theorised as aboriginal. For women like Tita, the principal character, the territorial singularity of the kitchen serves as both confinement and transcendence, as an emanative and yet a repressive force. Just as food operates as a weapon for Tita's silent rebellion against the crushing powers of oppressive patriarchy through culinary violence and gastronomic outbursts, the recipes in the novel help to forge and re-write the nation by identifying and pronouncing the characters' ethnicity.

Keywords: Kitchen, food, cooking, writing.

*Like Water for Chocolate*¹, after its 1989 publication, was immediately welcomed as a reader's epicurean delight and instantly acclaimed as a feminist text on bondage, deprivation and consequent insurgence against hegemonic powers and the social horrors of hierarchy. With its intricate inter-textual matrix and a fragmented narrative structure that is sectional yet symmetrically divided into twelve months corresponding to twelve recipes, the novel was a rapid commercial success. In an interview by Molly O' Neill, Laura Esquivel says: "First, I chose the recipes I liked the most ...and I pictured what sort of meaning these recipes would have in the lives of my characters. In accord with the recipes, I created a dramatic structure, the same one I used when I wrote movie and television scripts" (8).

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, each chapter sticks to a narrative format that begins with a recipe, detailing a list of ingredients and entailing a technical procedure only to be interrupted and intruded upon by a string of events that leave the recipe in suspension for the sake of narrative urgency. Hence, as in a folletín² novel, every chapter culminates to an episodic closure coinciding with the completion of a meal only to anticipate a new crisis and its forestalling.

Defying established modern meta-narratives, with its non-linearity and non-canonical methodology of writing, *Like Water for Chocolate* under the garb of a prototypical domestic literary form, is an open invitation to explore the varied unconventional discourses on female body and embodiment, found interred in this text in a magic-realist mode; the novel is placed

before the readers like a table filled with chronologically arranged series of delectable, appetizing recipes/chapters that exploit ‘the erotic aesthetics of spice’(Morton 1).

As its lengthy subtitle permits, the novel breeds at the crossroad of multiple genres - a manuscript cookbook, a manual, a fictional biography, a magical realist text, a romance and a serial fiction. The “intertitles” (Genette 27) at the beginning of each chapter with their reiterative function and enlistment of ingredients or raw materials pertaining to the culinary world, terms, recipes, and names of food and drinks entail a kind of carnival dynamics as pointed out by Julia Kristeva in her studies on Antoine de Sale. Atypical with a parodic “generic slippage” (Dobrian 56) the novel redefines feminism by celebrating pluralism and post-modernity over the univocal, authoritative, patriarchal discourse of power and asserts femininity by selecting the kitchen as “the ideal space for women to exert their power, sexuality, and creativity” from being “the paradigmatic site of female enslavement and drudgery” (Zubaiurre 5).

Examining the conflicted affiliation between a woman and her home, Roberta Rubenstein opines that since Homeric times in heroic quest, home has been “among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our physic vocabularies,” (4) because of its psychopathological connections to memory and experience:

longing for home may be understood as a yearning for recovery or return to the idea of a nurturing, unconditionally accepting place/space that has been repressed in contemporary feminism. Narratives [such as *Like Water for Chocolate*] that excavate and recover the positive meanings of home and nostalgia in effect represent ‘the return of the repressed’ in that they foreground, confront, and attempt to resolve that subversive longing (4).

Esquivel’s kitchen-centred plot exploits the cult of domesticity not as a signifier of passive femininity but of subversive female power. The boundaries of kitchenspace or rather its boundlessness is defined more by social activity and gendered relationships rather than by its strict physicality. Especially in Mexico, the word *cocina* or ‘Kitchen’ incorporates a complex structure inhabited by women who give shape to a female community and a female subculture through food preparation: “On Mama Elena’s ranch, sausage making was a real ritual. ... All the women in the family had to participate.... they gathered around the dining room table in the afternoon, and between the talking and the joking the time flew by until it started to get dark” (*LWFC* 13).

The kitchen table is “the neuralgic point of this social space” (Barrueto 38). By locating the plot on a recognizably female space, Esquivel “[makes] the feminist discourse sensitive to a demographically diverse feminist readership while continuing to modify patriarchal systems” (Schneider 2). The kitchen exists as a sensual realm of food filled up with labour and laughter, gossip and giggle, spicy talk and intimate conversation, with details of bodies and desire. Tina Escaja states: “The fundamental spatial pole – the kitchen – within which the novel develops, is symptomatic. The kitchen represents the new centre of interpretation where the reality of such marginality is created and re-constructed; it represents in some ways the identity of Mexican women” (4).

Subjecting her to “paternal absence and maternal abuse” (Meacham 101), Tita’s hastened arrival on the kitchen table seals her tragic destiny and destination: “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 coriander, steamed milk, garlic and, of course, onion” (*LWFC* 9). The prenatal tears that Tita sheds in the womb induced by her mother cutting onions, causes the water to break and the fluids evaporate, leaving behind enough salt to feed the family for many

years. The shock of her father's sudden death when she is only two days old, dries her up her mother's milk and renders Mama Elena unable to breast-feed Tita, which is why she is handed over to Nacha who as an indigenous mother, sustains her on teas and thin corn gruel. Tita, who begins her life fatherless and is forced to live without a man of her love, is circumstantially entitled as the ranch cook and paradoxically entrusted with the responsibility to provide nourishment to those who deny her since her birth:

...with Nacha dead, Tita was the best qualified of all the women in the house to fill the vacant post in the kitchen, and in there flavours, smells, textures and the effects they could have were beyond Mama Elena's iron command.... Tita was the last link in a chain of cooks who had been passing culinary secrets from generation to generation since ancient times, and she was considered the finest exponent of the marvellous art of cooking. (LWFC 45-46)

In *Women Singing in the Snow*, Tey Diana Rebolledo shows how “cooking is linked to women's way of knowing. This women's culture is just beginning to be seriously recognised as an intellectual tradition” (130). *Like Water for Chocolate* privileges women by allowing them access to gendered knowledge, from which men are viably excluded; they are the sole custodians of secrets, tips, tricks, and techniques to redress any familial crisis. Culinary secrets, over time, develop into stable formulae through practice: “The quail must be dry-plucked because putting them in boiling water affects their flavour. That is just one of many cooking secrets that can only be learned through practice” (LWFC 48).

At Mama Elena's outright dismissal to engage Tita and Pedro, “...they knew, she and the table, that they could never have even the slightest say in the unknown forces that fated Tita to bow before her mother's absurd decision, and the table to continue to receive the bitter tears that she had first shed on the day of her birth” (LWFC 14). On being consigned to the precincts of the kitchen, Tita's original position as the legitimate daughter of the farm owners is forfeited.

Nacha is a pervasive presence throughout the novel – she co-exists with generations of indigenous culture – equipping Tita to mitigate Mama Elena's Porfiriato rule and also summoning a return to the Mexican culture. In March, not only does Tita hear the ghost of Nacha dictate the recipe of a pre-Hispanic dish to her, but also can her body consubstantiate with that of Nacha's: “So skilful was she that it seemed Nacha herself was in Tita's body doing all those things” (LWFC 47). Denied, and starving from emotional validation, Tita receives culinary education from Nacha and learns to combat her mother's arbitrary rule with alternative forms of expression: “Just as a poet plays with words, Tita juggled ingredients and quantities at will” (LWFC 64). De Valdes affirms: “The woman's fiction of this woman's world concentrated on one overwhelming fact of life: how to transcend the conditions of existence and express oneself in love and in creativity” (78).

The kitchen also signals “a spatial and an ideological separation between Tita and the other women in the family manifested in Tita's dress, her behaviour, and the food she consumes” (Martinez 118). In her early years, Tita, highly perceptive and sensory, is able to connect to her environment but on her own terms –being chained down to the kitchen, she establishes her own equation through a clever strategy of paradoxical substitution and a wilful policy of subversion. Her childhood toys and games comprise of sausages and spoons and she makes a game of sprinkling water on the hot griddle to see it dance: “Together they made up all sorts of games and activities to do with cooking” (LWFC 12).

The therapeutic, cathartic and pharmacological nature of Tita's cooking is a kind of intercession through magical forces; food prepared develops certain affective and reactive properties. Tita's personality syncretises her subjectivity and matter; the effect of that union is evident in the intra-corporeal effects and phenomenal results of her Carnavalesque culinary ventures. Tita acquires a quasi-absolute dominance over the ranch members, through the explosive power of cooking. "In Esquivel's fiction, food is infused with the emotion of the cook and translates that emotion to those who consume it; healthy and pathological responses to food, environment, and healing are indicative of character" (Andrist 121). Tita transgresses, inverts and destabilizes Mama Elena's malevolence and malignance by causing a gastronomic chaos. The first culinary intervention occurs in February, when she is relegated to the kitchen to prepare the *Chabela* wedding cake at her sister Rosaura's marriage to Pedro; her tears as she prepares the dough provokes a chemical reaction in the cake influencing all those who consume it. Her despair at love's futility and failure to unite with the man of her desire gets infused in the cake and invests it with magical properties to induce pain and pathos among the diners so that they throw up. Nostalgia overpowers everyone, pining and whining for their lost love and Nacha even dies, "a picture of her fiancé clutched in her hands" (*LWFC* 40). In December, when Esperanza is getting married, Tita prepares Chiles in Walnut Sauce – a dish that precludes the consummation of two pairs in true love – Esperanza and Alex; Tita and Pedro – by stimulating amorous instincts in all the diners. Hence Tita's authentic experience metaphysically manifests itself in mythic proportions through cooking that Laura Esquivel describes is "a constant reminder of the alchemy between perceived and unseen forces" (O' Neill 8). Hence each feast pre-empts certain supernatural outcomes and according to Bakhtin: "The victorious and triumphant nature of every banquet makes it not only the appropriate coronation, but also the appropriate framework for a series of capital events" (255). "...those magical words *supper is served*" (*LWFC* 143) is always a prelude to any amorous act. After the supper is over, Pedro forces himself on Tita, makes her lose virginity, and exercises his right on her as his property. Dining, in Mexico, is decoded as a site of eating together and communicating about food: "When the talk turns to eating, a subject of the greatest importance, only fools and sick men don't give it the attention one deserves" (*LWFC* 143). Socialization of food is mediated by collectively confronting a meal that is a subset of the cook's culinary knowledge and his/her unverballed intentions and enjoying that meal together for its more artistic worth.

In March, when Pedro brings roses for Tita, marking her first anniversary as the ranch cook - a gesture provoking irk of Mama Elena who dictates Tita to destroy those flowers – she, instead, utilises those flowers to prepare a "dish for the gods" (*LWFC* 48). As she presses those flowers against her breasts, the thorns prick and like Christ, Tita physically exhibits bloody stigmata. Her blood suffused sauce in rose-petal triggers passionate impulses in those who consume it. Tita is incarnated in the food; and as Cecilia Lawless observes, "food transforms Tita's body into the site of desire to be consumed at the same time that it articulates her desires" (270). The syntax of the recipe, its structure and its ultimate message, is founded on a series of commands; both Tita and Pedro discover a new intermediary space or an eroticised medium for transmitting their love:

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, totally sensuous.... Pedro didn't offer any resistance. He let Tita penetrate to the farthest corners of his being (*LWFC* 49).

This is reversed in April, when Pedro's stare at the rhythmic movement of Tita's unfettered breasts as she grinds ingredients in a *metate* for preparing *mole* for Roberto's baptism party, gives rise to a virtual intercourse and makes the virginal Tita miraculously lactate and replace Rosaura, who is herself unable to breast feed her son.

Drawing a relationship between women's cooking and their sexualised bodies, Dubisch suggests:

We might draw a parallel between the kitchen and the vagina, each an important entryway for the maintenance of the family – through sustenance and procreation, respectively – but each also a potential arena for pollution ... Both kitchen and sexual entryway are subject to cultural rules regarding the passage of substances, rules that serve to turn a natural product or impulse into a culturally approved one. And each, because it is a point of entry between inside and out, carries a certain element of ambivalence or liminality (211).

For Gertrudis, the aphrodisiac spell of the quail in rose petal sauce precipitates her outrageous escape from the devouring boundaries of the ranch. Her unsurpassable thirst for sex turns her into a willing and wilful whore after which she is shown as eating up an entire town's male population before her sexual appetite is satisfied. In this way Gertrudis undercuts all notions of male virility as emblematic of male power, and subverts the meaning of sex as male power over the female body. Her hypersexualisation becomes a symbol of female empowerment rather than the content of male fantasies. Gertrudis' excess as the archetypal independent woman - liberated and consistent in her deviance to the worn out social norms and age-old customs – is further attested in her infrequent attendance in the kitchen excepting one occasion when she must take over the preparation of the cream fritters while Tita informs her pregnancy to Pedro. She reads "this recipe as if she were reading hieroglyphics" (*LWFC* 173) – a gesture affirming her discomfort with stereotyped role of the woman in a female space.

As Tita is ushered into a new phase of metaphorical motherhood with Roberto's birth, she impregnates and gives birth to new recipes. From the perspective of embodiment, Tita, through her palpable physical participation and performance in the kitchen, is not only able to "insert an added dimension of materiality to our notions of culture and history" (Csordas 4) but also able to project women as subjects transforming their environment rather than an objects of consumption or victims of change. Mama Elena, for obvious reasons, however, decides to send Rosaura, Pedro and Roberto across the border to San Antonio and this separation kills Roberto because as Chenchu says, "whatever he ate, it didn't agree with him" (*LWFC* 89). Upset with the news Tita, unable to bear it anymore, goes insane and for the first time takes recourse to a culinary violence that is self abnegating: "Tita felt a violent agitation take possession of her being... and then ... she started to tear apart all the sausages she could reach, screaming wildly" (*LWFC* 89).

The Spanish origin of the word "recipe" - *recetas* - broadly means prescriptions for medicine, implying recuperative and remedial powers of cooking. Rabuzzi feels that in the transmission of recipes, women:

are actually in touch with a level beneath our visible, still largely Platonic, masculine vision of 'reality'.... Psychologically, this level relates to the early symbiosis between mother and child; archaeologically, it relates to evidence, drawn from around the world, of prepatriarchal goddess worship (94).

Nancy Chadorow feels that the formation of a creative female community in the De la Garza kitchen by means of a clever elimination of patriarchal codes reflects a female solidarity and a female propensity to resist patriarchal pressures by redefining their identity more relationally than men in the dull monotonous kitchen chores. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Barrueto confirms that “the cooking quarters are represented as a dark foreboding place, almost a reflection of the ideology which produces it. Ironically, the erstwhile happiness of the cooks and the lionizing of women as cooking entities” (38) nullify it to an extent. As an objective-correlative of Tita’s psyche, the kitchen is a transit point where she can synchronise her emotional upheavals: “She felt a mass of conflicting emotions and the best way to put some order in her thoughts was to start by putting some order in the kitchen” (*LWFC* 144). In doing so, “Esquivel offers a liberating vision of a denigrated experience of “dailiness” in many women’s lives” (Juhasz 223-24).

The kitchen in *Like Water for Chocolate* undergoes a metamorphosis into a discursive productive site for the triply marginalised – the Creole, the maid, the woman:

The cultural production of a recipe takes place within the zone of a kitchen where the woman appears as a producer instead of merely reproducer. The kitchen is a site of production of self, even though traditionally it is seen as an enclosing prison. Through a discourse of commands, the women in *Like Water for Chocolate* break out of the ideological constraints of the kitchen as “women’s space”. Rather than a constraint, the kitchen here serves to open into other sites or becomes converted from a colonised space into one of possibility. (Lawless 43)

The de la Garza ranch presents a microcosmic representation of the external revolution and as the writer herself states: “As a very young girl, I understand that the interior activities of the home are as significant as the exterior activities of society” (O’Neill 8). By violating the power of the *Paterfamilias* personified by Mama Elena, Tita symbolizes Mexican Revolution; Tita stands for *la Reforma* by disqualifying her mother who extricates herself not only from her maternal duties but also from the kitchen. Tita’s dishes invoke a culinary wisdom that is her means of resistance to intergenerational violence. Meacham says:

Metaphorically, Tita’s supernatural powers fall within the Latin American context of magic realism, that unique convergence of the supernatural and the mundane, to accomplish an exuberant transgression of Mama Elena’s repressive domain. The foods that Tita prepares cause violent eruptions of internal substances in those who consume them – tears, semen, mother’s milk, and intestinal gases – all defying the efforts of the mother. (106)

Food not only elicits collective identifications, but also contains a strong mnemonic component through the sense of taste and smell: “smells have the power to evoke the past, bringing back sounds and even smells that have no match in the present” (*LWFC* 12). In the February Chapter, memory and food is linked: “The moment Tita opened the jar, the smell of apricots transported her to the afternoon they made the marmalade” (*LWFC* 32).

In hard times, Tita evokes the memory of Nacha and her imparted knowledge in the kitchen. Familiar flavours and aromas activate restorative nostalgia in Tita when she loses her sanity in the event of Roberto’s death: “a pot scattered in the air such a pleasant smell and at the same time familiar smell that it made her open the window in order to deeply inhale it. With her eyes closed she saw herself sitting next to Nacha on the kitchen floor while they made corn tortillas: she saw the kettle where a most aromatic stew cooked” (*LWFC* 110).

Contextualised in the set-up of the Mexican Revolution, food legitimises itself as a cultural entity and functions as a foundational force in the nation-building process. In doing so, the kitchen attains a socio-political status and transcends the corners of the courtyard. Almost all the recipes learnt from Nacha are indigenous and pre-Hispanic and with slight alterations or some modifications they gradually shape and solidify Tita's cultural identity and make it palpable when she is uprooted from her nativity and brought to John Brown's house. The acute sense of displacement and dislocation makes her unable to "even try the food, it was a tasteless food which she disliked" (*LWFC* 109). Tita remains uninspired by the sort of American food, cooked by Katy and is not reinstated to her normal self until she tastes the food of the home, the food from the home – the oxtail broth – brought by Chenchu. For David Sutton, recipes are like 'memory jogs' (201) that help Tita refurbish her inner self: "Just like old times, when Nacha was still alive and they had so often made oxtail soup together. Chenchu and Tita laughed reliving those moments, and they cried remembering the steps of the recipe" (*LWFC* 114).

As a testimony to the cultural contours as well as the realities as experienced by the Mexicans, food and "cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure or else resigns itself to revealing its contradictions" (Levi-Strauss 595). Women are writers of a cultural history through a culinary discourse - the *sazon*⁴ - and translators of the kitchen space from a domestic arena to an area of creative culinary production. Hence as Mehta believes, the kitchen becomes a sanctuary of female self-affirmation by guaranteeing the sanctity of women-centred experiences and relationships.

Although the kitchen walls are delimiting, it purports a mode of escape because "for Tita the joy of living was wrapped up in the delights of food" (*LWFC* 11); Tita's domain is that 'gigantic world' by means of which she comprehends world that she is forbidden to know: "That world was an endless expanse that began at the door between the kitchen and the rest of the house, whereas everything on the kitchen side of that door, on through the door leading to the patio and the kitchen and herb gardens was completely hers – it was Tita's realm" (*LWFC* 11). The dichotomy of the private/public space mixes, melts and merges in and through the kitchen that functions both as the centre of the household and the locus of community life.

Mesoamerican pre-Hispanic culture that forms the basis for Mexican cooking is ritualistic in nature. Nacha instructs Tita that *tamales* remain raw irrespective of how long they are on stove, if two or more people argue during cooking them, as *tamales* are angry and need to be pacified. Later the beans Tita attempts to cook are affected by her anxiety, anguish and agony over the loss of Esperanza; they refuse to cook until she sings to them and "the bean liquor [boils] madly. The beans [allow] the liquid...to penetrate them; they swell until they [are] about to burst" (*LWFC* 219). The tortillas shredded for the chickens as Tita altercates with Rosaura cause an even enraging effect. Once the chickens eat those anger-inflicted tortillas, a frenzied fight erupts and aggravates into a pandemonic chicken tornado.

Cooking, in *Like Water for Chocolate* refuses to demote itself to the pettiness of household chores and instead denotes any act of self-sacrifice to provide nourishment, "because the food a woman prepares for her family seems also to be an extension of her all-nourishing breasts, family meals may function at one level as analogues of the Eucharistic feast.... Every meal can thus be seen at one level as a sacrifice in which the bountiful mother is symbolically consumed through the food she proffers" (Rubenstein 129).

Tita's unorthodox upbringing undercuts conventional notions of motherhood as recalled in Stanlie James' concept of 'othermothering'.⁵ As a 'metaphoric womb' (Christie 116), the uterine space of the kitchen fosters self-containment; after Nacha, it is Tita who designates as the

surrogate to Roberto as Rosaura, like Mama Elena is unable to produce milk. Women, like Mama Elena and Rosaura, having unnatural relations to food and cooking are rendered incapacitated in feeding and providing nourishment to their biological children, whereas Tita, although deprived of biological motherhood, spiritually and magically elevates to the archetypal role of providing nurturance as Tonantzin, the fertility Aztec goddess or Ceres, the Roman goddess of plenty: “If there was one thing Tita couldn’t resist, it was a hungry person asking for food” (LWFC 70).

Food also displays the terminal effects of an unnatural mother-daughter relationship, unnatural because of the evil perpetuated in a place where culture has placed women, that is, the household. It is here that conspiracy, intrigues, politics and other forms of micro-aggression come to surface. To gain social acceptance, women, at times, produce systematic violence by perpetrating and perpetuating the fundamental social customs of the patriarchal system. Tita is victimised by one such Mexican custom that forbids the youngest daughter from marrying since she has to perform the duty of caring her parents in their old age. Unjust severity and strictness characterise Mama Elena’s iron-fisted control of Tita’s life, and that cruel management works on various levels from chiding and chastisement to even caning, if required. Although not directly involved in cooking, whenever she is present in the kitchen, her disapproval and discontentment, gets reflected in her crude ways of handling food. In February at Pedro and Rosaura’s wedding, the principal menu chosen by Mama Elena uses capons or castrated chickens – an unsexed ingredient symbolising feebleness and cowardice, especially Pedro’s unmanliness in not being able to rescue Tita and his timid submission to Mama Elena’s decision to accept Rosaura. In March, as Tita tries to quaintly kill the quails for her quail in red-petal sauce recipe: “It occurred to her that she could use her mother’s strength right now. Mama Elena was merciless, killing with a single blow” (LWFC 49). Not only is Mama Elena extremely corporal and unmatched in “dividing, dismantling, dismembering, desolating, detaching, dispossessing, destroying or dominating” (LWFC 87), but also in her fierce act of protecting the ranch she can even emasculate any man; Mama Elena’s ruthless hostility and sadism is prominent: “Applying pressure, smashing to bits, skinning, those were among her favourite activities” (LWFC 208). Mama Elena’s aggression in cooking style is an invasion in the De la Garza kitchen that is principally occupied by Tita. Her perennial attempts to challenge, question and conquer Tita’s creativity in the kitchen, gets intensified in her reluctance and even a deliberate refusal to eat food prepared by her – a gesture showing her deep-rooted distrust in her and a natural dissatisfaction with her unconventional methods. This mistrust of food is ultimately the cause of her death as Mama Elena suffers from drug overdose to avoid poisoning from Tita’s food.

Although “It is the woman as *daughter* who occupies the centre of the global reconstruction of subjectivity and subject-object relation. The woman as mother remains in the position of other...” (Hirsch 136). But it is only after Mama Elena’s death that the similarities between Tita and her mother are revealed to her: “During the funeral Tita really wept for her mother. Not for the castrating mother who had repressed Tita her entire life, but for the person who had lived a frustrated love” (LWFC 138).

In *Like Water for Chocolate*, the manuscript cookbook that Esperanza accedes to is a cultural album of the native Indians like Nacha, Chenchá and Tita as well as an intimate biography with culinary wonders teaching “the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen...” (LWFC 216). The narrative rebounds as it commences and closes with the same recipe – Christmas Rolls - corresponding to similar occasions of birthday celebration of the daughter of Esperanza who was similar to her great-aunt Tita in many respects – both were born prematurely

in proximity to a death in the family, both spent most of their time in the kitchen, being fed on teas and *atoles* instead of breast milk of their biological mothers and both shared the same fate of remaining single. Esperanza's daughter, who share the same culinary passion like Tita reminiscences: "How wonderful the flavour, the aroma of her kitchen, her stories as she prepared the meal, her Christmas Rolls! I don't know why mine never turn out like hers, or why my tears flow so freely when I prepare them – perhaps I am as sensitive to onions as Tita, my great-aunt, who will go on living as long as there is someone who cooks her recipes" (*LWFC* 222). In repeating the recipe that Tita had prepared on her sixteenth birthday, a *continuity* between generations is ascertained and "some sense of community is provided by the *method* of doing, when that method reflects the performance of earlier women" (Rabuzzi 102).

Breaking with the feminist tradition where kitchens are often depicted as a solitary detention, somewhere in the inglenooks of the De la Garza kitchen, burns a revolutionary fire for emancipation and dissident action. "Kitchenspace is at once a cultural archive and a laboratory" (Christie 113). Mexican kitchens, with women's physical occupancy, necessitate reciprocity networks and facilitate social as well as cultural reproduction. In her studies of culinary biographies, Anne Goldman asserts:

the very domestic and commonplace quality of cooking makes it an attractive metonym for culture... presenting a family recipe and figuring its circulation within a community of readers provides a metaphor nonthreatening in its apparent avoidance of overt political discourse and yet culturally resonant in its evocation of the relation between the labour of the individual and her conscious effort to reproduce familial traditions and values. (178)

Like Water for Chocolate reinforces the role of women cooks as preservers of culture; the fiestas in the text include two weddings, a baptism, a welcome home party for Gertrudis, two engagement dinners for Dr John Brown and Tita and a Christmas party. Barthes assigns food a function that is "commemorative [since] food permits a person ... to partake each day of the national past. In this case, the historical quality is obviously linked to food techniques.... They are...the repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors" (Barthes 28).

As in the intricate process of writing and story-telling, cooking fundamentally develops from the art of combining ingredients in their perfect measure and proportion. Anne Goldman echoes Ferré's associating cooking and writing, as she states: "reproducing a recipe, like re-telling a story, may be at once cultural practice and autobiographical assertion. If it provides an apt metaphor for the reproduction of culture from generation to generation, the act of passing down recipes from mother to daughter works as well to figure a familial space within which self articulation can take place" (172). Significantly it is only the kitchen and the bedroom that allows a woman "to work her magic that is, some emanational attractiveness that gave women a temporary relief from drudgery. Concessions were granted by men, when they felt that their needs as masters had been satisfied" (Gutierrez 230). Hence a Spanish proverb rightfully affiliates as epigraph to *Like Water for Chocolate* and foresees the erotic component of the plot: "*A la mesa y en la cama / Una sola vez se llama*" [To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid] (*LWFC* 5).

The expression *Like Water for Chocolate* in the title in fact summons a whole range of associations to heat and sexual combustion. Not to mention that chocolate has been the national beverage of Mexico since seventeenth-century, boiling water required to make chocolate in the

Nahuatl way is metaphorically not only comparable to Tita's incitement and irritation but also to her sexual excitement and desire. Chocolate, if interpolated semiotically, can contest prescribed social norms. A late-night television advertisement of the decadent chocolate cake in a sexy voice-over and gastroporn images is not simply a culinary temptation to consume it, but also a sensual call to seek erotic indulgence. On the other hand, when interpolated ideologically, the chocolate cake does not merely remind us of the sustenance food, provides, but transforms history into nature by playing upon sexual desire and culturally imbibed caprices of fulfilment through consumption. More precisely: "to cook and eat Mexican food is to celebrate sensuality in every great chamber of this textured, perfumed, delicious, beautiful, and memorable gastronomic antiquity" (Condon and Bennet 3).

Fire is synonymous of flame and ignition. In a gastronomic novel *Like Water for Chocolate*, the seething and simmering sensation of boiling is associated with indefatigable sexual urges in the novel. Tita's plunge into culinary activity is a kind of mating call: "The sound of the pans bumping against each other, the smell of the almonds browning in the griddle, the sound of Tita's melodious voice, singing as she cooked, had kindled his sexual feelings" (*LWFC* 68). When Pedro and Tita first meet in January, "It was then she understood how dough feels when it is plunged into boiling oil" (*LWFC* 18). In April, when Tita's breasts catch Pedro's gaze, "Tita knew through her own flesh how fire transforms the elements, how a lump of cornflour is changed into a tortilla, how a soul that hasn't been warmed by the fire of love is lifeless, like a lifeless ball of cornflour" (*LWFC* 63).

Chocolate associates itself with dark temptations, hidden desires, warm sensations and sinful love. But in *Like Water for Chocolate*, it is also correlated to fume and fury. In August Chapter Tita's infinite and incompressible rage at Rosaura's decision to subject Esperanza to the same fate of never marrying is expressed as "The steam rising from the pan mingled with the heat given off by Tita's body. The anger she felt within her acted like yeast on bread dough.... Tita was literally 'like water for hot chocolate' – she was on the verge of boiling over.... She felt her head about to burst, like kernel of popcorn" (*LWFC* 137-38).

The kitchen, surveyed perfunctorily, is a refuge and reclusion for Tita from where she seeks revenge against Mama Elena's matriarchal despotism through her culinary enterprise. On a deeper perspective, however, the kitchen is the symbolic centre where Tita retreats to inquest for her pre-Columbian roots; her character revolves round the kitchen as a physical centre and as the literal centre of her universe - it is in here that her character evolves from an arrested development and a stunted growth under an intense culpable suffering towards an all-round spiritual wholeness.

End Notes:

¹ In the course of the article *Like Water for Chocolate* will be cited in abbreviation as *LWFC* in parenthesis beside quotations used from this text.

² Folletin, meaning a serialised fiction originates in French *Feuilleton* from the word *Feuille*, meaning a "leaf". This fiction mostly uses the theme of love and mystery to some extent.

Works Cited:

Andrist, Debra D. "Transformation, Code, and Mimesis: Healing the Family in *Like Water for Chocolate*." *Laura Esquivel's Mexican Fictions: Like Water for Chocolate – The Law of Love – Swift as Desire – Malinche*. Ed. Elizabeth Moore Willingham. UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. 121-135. Print.

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. USA: Indiana University Press, 1984. Print.
- Barrueto, Jorge J. "Like Water for Chocolate: Cinematic Patriarchy and Tradition." *A Recipe for Discourse: Perspectives on Like Water for Chocolate*. Ed. Eric Skipper. NY: Rodopi, 2010. 29-49. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption." *Food and Culture: A Reader*. Eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik. USA: Routledge, 2013. 23-30. Print.
- Chadorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999. Print.
- Christie, Maria Elisa. "Gendered Spaces, Gendered Knowledge." *Laura Esquivel's Mexican Fictions: Like Water for Chocolate – The Law of Love – Swift as Desire – Malinche*. Ed. Elizabeth Moore Willingham. UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2012. 105-120. Print.
- Condon, Richard and Wendy Bennet. *The Mexican Stove: What to Put on it and in it*. USA: Doubleday, 1973. Print.
- Csordas, Thomas J. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.
- De Valdes, Maria Elena. "Verbal and Visual Representation of Women: *Como agua para chocolate / Like Water for Chocolate*." *World Literature Today* 80 (1993): 78-82. Print.
- Dubisch, Jill. "Culture Enters through the Kitchen: Women, Food, and Social Boundaries in Rural Greece." *Gender and Power in Rural Greece*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986. 195-214. Print.
- Escaja, Tina. "Women, Alterity and Mexican Identity in *Como agua para Chocolate*." *A Recipe Discourse: Perspectives on Like Water for Chocolate*. Ed. Eric Skipper. NY: Rodopi, 2010. Print.
- Esquivel, Laura. Interview by Molly O' Neill. *At Dinner with Laura Esquivel: Sensing the Spirit in All Things, Seen and Unseen*. NY Times, 1993. Print.
- Genette, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Print.
- Goldman, Anna. "'I Yam What I Yam': Cooking, Culture, and Colonialism." *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*. Ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992. 169-195. Print.
- Gutierrez, Roman A. *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846*. California: Stanford University Press, 1991. Print.
- Hirsch, Marriane. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, and Feminism*. Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1989. Print.
- Juhasz, Suzanne. *A Desire for Women: Relational Psychoanalysis, Writing, and Relationships Between Women*. USA: Rutgers University Press, 2003. Print.
- Lawless, Cecilia. "Experimental Cooking in *Como agua para Chocolate*." *Monographic Review* 8 (1992): 269-72. Print.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Culinary Triangle." *Partisan Review* 33 (1965): 586-95. Print.
- Martinez, Victoria. "Myth and Marginalisation in *Como agua para Chocolate*." *A Recipe for Discourse: Perspectives on Like Water for Chocolate*. Ed. Eric Skipper. NY: Rodopi, 2010. 115-129. Print.

- Meacham, Cherie. "Como agua para Chocolate: Cinderella and the Revolution." *A Recipe for Discourse: Perspectives on Like Water for Chocolate*. Ed. Eric Skipper. NY: Rodopi, 2010. 101-113. Print.
- Mehta, Brinda. *Notions of Identity, Diaspora, and Gender in Caribbean Women's Writing*. USA: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. Print.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic*. UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000. Print.
- Rabuzzi, Kathryn Allen. *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*. UK: Seabury Press, 1982. Print.
- Rebolledo, Tey Diana. *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995. Print.
- Rubenstein, Roberta. *Home Matters: Longing and Belonging, Nostalgia and Mourning in Women's Fiction*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. Print.
- Schneider, Julia Maria. "Recreating the Image of Women in Mexico: A Genealogy of Resistance in Mexican Narrative Set During the Revolution." Diss. USA: Louisiana State University, 2010. Web. 6 May 2011.
- Sutton, David Evan. *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. UK: Berg, 2001. Print.
- Zubaiurre, Maite. *Culinary Eros in Contemporary Hispanic Female Fiction: From Kitchen Tales to Table Narratives*. USA: West Chester University, 2006. Print.