

DOMESTICITY: SEED FOR REBELLION IN ESQUIVEL'S 'LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE' - A CASE IN POINT

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Abstract

The paper will argue that Esquivel's characters demonstrate that domesticity does not always signify domestication. Esquivel perceptively filters the combative domesticity of the 'soldaderas,' who played an important role in the Revolution into her narrative. During the revolution, the soldaderas received a salary from the male soldiers in exchange for providing domestic services, which included preparing food, washing clothes, and sexual intercourse. The soldadera's role was considered so critical to military success that some of them were designated coronels in the army. The soldaderas' 'female' domesticity enabled them to carve out a visible space for themselves within the 'male' structure of the military. Similarly, in Esquivel's novel, domesticity, instead of being an obstacle for resistance, becomes a fertile ground for seeding rebellion against the prescribed performance of femininity. The dictates of normative expectations confined women to the domestic space. Inside the home, Esquivel's women protagonists cook, clean, bear children, take on familial care, but instead of being passive receptors of male sexuality they become desiring women without moving outside the domestic space. The chosen weapons for the rebellious women in the novel are food recipes. Every dish they prepare is a tactical element of their mutinous strategy.

The expression 'Como Agua Para Chocolate' translated as Like Water for Chocolate is a colloquial Mexican expression used when the water is boiling during the preparation of a traditional Mexican drink, hot chocolate. Likewise, a metaphor for a person who has reached its boiling point, is infuriated and angry, a point of no return and, or experiencing carnal agitation and uncontrollable excitement. Laura Esquivel's bestseller 'Como Agua Para Chocolate' portrays through the women protagonists' emotions and feelings of fury, rage, displeasure, contempt, resentment, tantrum, animosity, outrage, displeasure, resistance, defiance, disobedience, love, longing, craving, lust, yearning, hunger, passion, excitement, furore, rebellion among others as if like water for chocolate. The vehemence displayed on the part of the women are result of discrimination and marginalization which Mexico as a society experienced.

Keywords: domesticity, rebellion, kitchen, soldaderas, women

NOVEL: LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE

Esquivel's novel Like Water for Chocolate is a genre that is unique in its structure and style, challenging the stereotype misogynist discourse. As Lawless states, 'an unclassifiable work that simultaneously breaks and brings together genre boundaries' (1997, 216) into an innovative, avant-garde piece of Mexican literature. A revolutionary piece of work, with an attempt to defy and transgress the already established mandates towards the literary production and illustration of the Mexican community through the protagonist's life around the kitchen and her romantic encounters. The narrative base elaborates on flavourful recipes of twelve extraordinary traditional pre-Hispanic Mexican dishes (Prieto, s.f.), which bring together the family members and love, hate,

laughter, and cries, are germinated, cooked, and curdled. The kitchen functions to celebrate success, triumph, joys of life, betrayal, quarrels, separation, reunions, marriages, death, and sadness. The recounting of home remedies and honest advice during the narration provides comfort and solace to the readers and connects them with their own lives. This concoction of elements in the narrative forms part of a twentieth-century parody. On the one hand, the author praises and treasures the talent and the skill women possess, in particular the art of culinary, and on the other, it is a satire of the socio, cultural and political state of Mexico and its women relegated in the early 20th century.

The novel's discursive strategy is that of culinary associated with women, both from the feminist and the patriarchal perspective, reflecting the resistance to the categorization of this duality. Kathleen Baston (2001) elucidates 'cooking ignores the limits of time and space, life and death, and self and others to create an environment in which rigid definitions are replaced by more fluid and hybrid conceptions of our relation to the world around us' (qtd in Geoffrion-Vinci & Guarino). The hybridity of the protagonist, Tita is the result of the kitchen, the recipe creation, culinary delight learnt from Nacha, the indigenous head cook of the Garza household, and the attributes she learns of sharing and giving. Critic Lawless, interprets cooking in positive light, an act that permits Tita to redefine the role of women in the kitchen (1993). Food, love, the cooking all give life and keep the desire as burning metaphors and their function in Esquivel's work shows that food, fire, and love are not destructive but life-affirming and life-producing, in fact life itself.

The Garza girls are agitated and angry for being domestically imprisoned, which is what the title of the novel refers to (Jaffe). The characters express this vehement in different forms. Tita's battle is one of resistance to the social impositions and constraints forced during the Porfiriato¹, the dictatorial regime of Porfirio Díaz. The title of the novel is inferring to commencement of revendication for the rights and defiance towards the established rules exemplified in the etiquette code, Manuel de Carreño² a nineteenth-century manual for good manners that glorified hierarchies and a bourgeois patriarchy and for the altruistic Mexican women. Tita blood boils, because of the unimaginable, complicated, and tense situation and relationship that she found herself in and for being denied the simple pleasures of life, 'su oráculo determinaba que en esta vida le estaba negado el matrimonio' (Esquivel 10), the oracle had decided for her right at her birth, that she was denied a marriage. Yet on another occasion when Pedro's son Roberto dies suddenly, engulfed in grief Tita, confronted, and condemned her mother for the cause of her nephew's death.

'enfrento firmemente la mirada de su madre mientras acariciaba el chorizo y después, en lugar de obedecerla, tomó todos los chorizos que encontró y los partió en pedazos, gritando enloquecida. - ¡Mira lo que hago con sus órdenes! ¡Ya me cansé! ¡Ya me cansé de obedecerla! ...- ¡Usted es la culpable de la muerte de Roberto! - ¡Le gritó Tita fuera de sí y salió corriendo, secándose la sangre que le escurría de la nariz, tomó al pinchón, la cubeta de lombrices y se subió al palomar' (108)

¹ Presidency of Porfirio Díaz from 1876-1911.

² It refers to 'Manual de Urbanidad y Buenas Maneras,' a guidebook written by Venezuelan, Manuel Antonio Carreño that elaborates the rules, principals and etiquettes that are expected to be observed by men and women in different social situations preceding a brief about the morales duties of be followed by both Latin American man and woman, and no deviation was acceptable.

[strongly confronted the gaze of her mother while caressing the choizo³ and then instead of obeying her, took the entire chorizo that she found and made them into pieces while screaming crazily. Look what I do with your orders, I am tired. I am tired of obeying you. You are responsible for the death of Robert, Tita shouted her lungs out and ran out of the kitchen drying the blood that was dripping from her nose, took the young pigeon and climbed on the pigeon loft with the tray of earthworms.]

For Tita, it was the breaking away from her mother's authoritarian chains. She contradicts and confronts her mother and her authority. Her domesticity had finally found point of no return. The fury, displeasure, contempt, resentment, tantrum, animosity, outrage, displeasure, resistance, defiance, disobedience, rebellion were emotions that Tita experienced and experimented. This unexpected behaviour of Tita and the emotional breakdown is her assertion of will and opposing the patriarchy.

The word recetas (recipe) of a 'plato' (dish) is also synonymous with a doctor's prescription, like when Tita is at Dr John's⁴ house and is unable to digest or develop a palate for the meals made by the American maid, Chench's 'caldo de colita de res' (ox tail soup) miraculously cures her as if waking up from a deep slumber, in fact she was re-born. Tita made every attempt to forget, including the ranch, her infancy, and the memories of her youth, came flooding back to her consciousness while having the soup, especially Nacha, the indigenous cook who brought her up, it was ox tail soup that always cured her. She was transported back in time to her market trips, the smell of freshly made tortillas, the tasteless colourful bones, the Christmas cake, the champurrado (a Mexican chocolate drink), cumin, garlic, onions, the smell of boiling milk, milk bread, in a fraction of a second, bursts of tears like a first born. It is no coincidence that it is her new birth, a process of healing herself from the same recipe that she has learnt and was being taught in the Garza kitchen. When she returns to Ranch, Tita had transformed from within unlike before, strength and wisdom lead her situation towards personhood and defying the stereotype.

The recipe that Tita elaborates in the beginning of the chapter is interjected with drama and incidents which impedes her cooking (Jaffe), which unfolds during the course of the chapters, concluding with the solution to the problem presented and the dish finally prepared and its outcome leading to the subsequent chapter, almost like in continuation. The aim of each of these narrations is for the consumer to express desires of love, passion, rage, anger, betrayal. On the art of elaborating deliberating creating sudden drama and guest's nostalgic explosion of tears and vomiting after consuming the wedding cake for her sister or the quail in rose petals provoked in sister Gertrudis unbridled passion and sexual liberation or germination of new code of communication for Pedro with Tita are outcome of Tita's suppressed emotions finding their way in the dishes prepared by her. As a result, the act of cooking is an act of healing for self and other, and of arousing love and emotions among the members who devour her cooking.

Feminine space and feminine role

Cooking has been a culture integral to women's lives in Mexico. The Garza household had women participate and contribute actively to the tradition along with chatter, laughs jokes, joys, and

³ Pork sausages

⁴ An American who was a family doctor to the Garza family.

sorrows. Only when the day ended, so did these activities. However, the winding up activities were as elaborate. For e.g.: taking back the chickens to their pens, drawing water from the well for the next days' breakfast, looking for firewood for cooking, such days were dedicated to reading, and prayer after the day ended. The other days they dedicated themselves to sewing, ironing, embroidering, or tailoring. These gendered activities are linked to the gendered space of home and kitchen. Garza girls' mother engaged her daughters in honing their feminine traits and domesticating them. The kitchen is site for cultural resistance to re-define identity and resist the dominant patriarchal discourse (Meah 2013). By examining how the De la Garza women use the community kitchen and their relationships with food, it becomes clear that Esquivel's kitchen-centered plot promotes a more approachable form of feminism in which cooking, and kitchen use are not viewed as passive femininity but as a means of subverting female social norms (Ola). The Mexican Revolution and the women 'soldaderas'⁵

The first ever political, cultural, and social revolution of the 20th century, the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), culminated to challenge the dictatorial regime of 34 years under the governance of then President Porfirio Diaz⁶. During the Porfiriato's regime, the process of internationalization of the country, obliged that its' citizen's be educated. As a result, the women of middle and upper class became teachers, propogandists, journalists, feminists, soldiers, nurses who could therefore, ascertain themselves in the revolution (Islas). The intellectuals and the liberals, both men and women from rural, indigenous, campesinos⁷, poor and vulnerable participated in the revolution that signalled the rebellion, violence and the anxiety of the Mexican society and the need for radical change in the social and culture values.

From woman's established function of stereotyped mother, a wife, a daughter, relegated to the confines of their home in the early IXX century. The second half of the century experienced women as contributor towards the building of the nation and visibly involved in the public spaces. Gertrudis, the second daughter participates actively in the revolution; she subverts the masculine domain, commands the troops, ascends as a coronel. Gertrudis represents a total transgression of both sexual and gender codes since she works as a prostitute and later as a revolutionary soldier. Her sexual transgression is thus linked to social revolution.

During the revolution, the soldaderas received a salary from the male soldiers in exchange for providing domestic services, which included preparing food, washing clothes, purchasing supplies, caring for the sick, burying the dead, and sexual intercourse. The Adelitas⁸ commanded the military forces of men and women troops to fight the Mexican civil war (Monsiváis). There were other women who were molested, kidnapped, and abducted from homes, villages, convents leaving them pregnant, and many disguised to protect themselves from the rampage (Salas). Despite such atrocities, women were seen participating in every aspect of the war, as transporter of arms, as nurses, as teachers, as secretaries, as journalist, as postwomen, as spies, as activist who were anti

⁵ This term soldaderas is not used for women soldiers, rather, women who left their homes to accompany their husbands during the civil war.

⁶ Mexican President for over thirty years.

⁷ A peasants or farmers, working in and from countryside.

⁸ Adelitas are names given to women soldiers, 'soldaderas' who fought alongside men during the Mexican Revolution.

elections, and formed part of different ideological groups such as villistas, zapatistas, carrancistas. The soldadera's role was considered so critical to military success that some of them were designated coronels in the army. Few courageous ones, maintained their identity while other practiced disguise, dressed like men, changed their name to safeguard themselves from sexual violence. While the end of the revolution meant the end of the valour and recognition of these women, classified as soldiers; only a few received a pension, with no permission to re-marry or be integrated officially in the military (Arce).

The Revolution, nevertheless, broke the barriers and the stereotype of *adelitas*. 'The soldaderas exhibited masculine characteristics, like strength and valour, and for these attributes, men were responsible for reshaping the soldadera's image into the ideal (docile, yet licentious) woman of the time' (Fernández). The soldaderas' 'female' domesticity enabled them to carve out a visible space for themselves within the 'male' structure of the military. The Mexican Revolution also gave birth to 'the Mexican Feminism' as a result of a common struggle of overthrowing the Diaz's regime (Ruiz).

CONCLUSION

The soldaderas' 'female' domesticity enabled them to carve out a visible space for themselves within the 'male' structure of the military. These women fighters survived and battled the struggle despite the gendered and cultural expectations and norms of the dominant patriarchy of Mexican society. The soldadera's bravery, assertiveness, and power were attempts to break away from the misogynist sentiments (Fernández). Gertrudis represents a total transgression of both sexual and gender codes since she works as a prostitute and later as a revolutionary soldier. Her sexual transgression is thus linked to social revolution.

Similarly, in Esquivel's novel, domesticity, instead of being an obstacle for resistance, becomes a fertile ground for seeding rebellion against the prescribed performance of femininity. Instead of arguing for the legitimacy of women's artistic production in the confinement of the home, Esquivel's work presents it as an intertextual palimpsest, a hallmark of postmodern art (Valdés). Tita's life is 'becomes a kind of recipe-a how-to book on surviving a mother's tyranny, or finding love amid familial and social struggle, or returning to a paradisiacal home' (Glenn). The Garza girls instead of being passive receptors of male sexuality, they become desiring women without moving outside the domestic space, rewrite and create a new recipe against the dictates of normative expectation and subvert the male canon. Kitchen converts into a site of liberation and reclaiming of identity for Tita, supposedly a marginalized space.

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