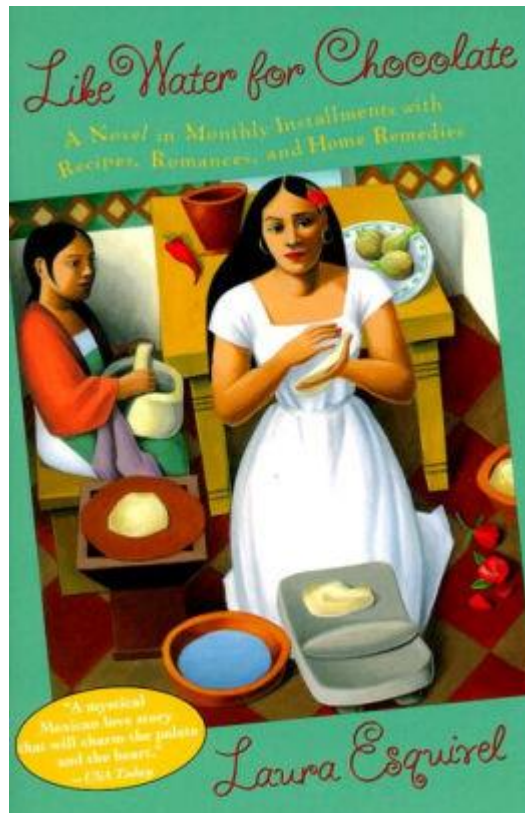


Transformation of Emotions and Actions in Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*

M. Jeevarathna & Dr. A. Selvalakshmi



Courtesy: <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/like-water-for-chocolate-laura-esquivel/1100011252#/>

Abstract

In the novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel explores the suppression and expression of communication. Esquivel uses avenues such as magical realism, the Mexican Revolution, character relationships, and food to exemplify the necessity of communication for both individuals and communities. Throughout this novel, the main character Tita is denied the fundamental right of communication. Her relationship with everyone in the household are complex, but it is Tita's mother, Mama Elena that attempts to extinguish her passion for life and love by forbidding Tita's verbal expression. Because of this denial she must find other modes to communicate her deepest desires and opinions. Tita is fortunate to have Nacha, her nanny to

teach her the ways of cooking which she utilizes as her main outlet of communication. It is through her cooking that one learns that Tita has a strong voice and passion that drives her. This inner passion and drive eventually transform themselves into modes of communication that are unimaginable. Her rebellion is revealed through magical realism. The reader can witness the buildup of Tita's emotions and their magical ramifications. This paper makes an effort to look into the techniques that the author uses to reveal the problem of control and rebellion - suppression and communication. The author's use of the Mexican revolution as the setting is interesting when examined very closely. The Mexican Revolution was not only about the people's voices not being heard, but also about the severe oppression of women. With the support of the Mexican Revolution, character relationships, food and magical realism, one can surmise Esquivel's purpose for writing *Like Water for Chocolate* may be to demonstrate how important communication is; and when there is oppression of one's ability to communicate, it will come out in any form it can.

Keywords: Esquivel, Oppression, women's suppression, communication, *Like water for chocolate*.



Laura Esquivel

Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/Laura-Esquivel/e/B000AQ0UHC>

Introduction

The women'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. -- Maria Elena de valdes

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Communication is a fundamental need for human beings. It is central to everyone's survival and pivotal to their growth. Every form of oppression begins by either taking this right away or creating an environment where what is communicated becomes immaterial and wholly ineffectual. For many, this right to speak up and be acknowledged is not even presented as an option from the outset, it is squelched often right from birth. For these people, their cultures, religious, political climates and, most influentially, their families work together to create silence and the inevitable compliance of the oppressed.

Central Theme

Laura Esquivel's central theme of the novel *Like Water for Chocolate* is communication. The author makes it clear through the character relationships, magical realism, revolution setting and the creation of food. On the other hand, she indicates that communication is necessary to survive both as an individual, family or community. She believes that the kitchen is the pathway of communication for women in oppressive situations and when it is not utilized as a communication path, it hinders their mental and physical health.

When a mind is not free to express its view directly, its reality often manifests indirectly. The truth of the human psyche, it seems, often comes through in whatever way it can. Alice Miller, a pre-eminent psychologist who specializes in the effects of one's childhood wounds on his/her life and on the culture at large, devoted a great deal of her writing to the examination of how an individual's authentic expressions show up in his/her work. The truth they were not free to utter often becomes inextricably interwoven in the stories and paintings and other creative mediums they put forth. But, Miller maintains, if a person's own truth does not make it to their conscious minds for integration, often they take shape in the form of physical diseases and even seemingly external circumstances. Miller devoted an entire book to the former entitled *The Body Never Lies*, detailing the backgrounds of famous as well as everyday persons and how their past imprints on the functioning of their bodies.

Miller claims the body holds the emotional truth of these individuals and that "the original negative emotion is an important signal emitted by the body. If that message is ignored, the body has to emit new signals in an attempt to make itself heard". (A. Miller 162)

Like Water for Chocolate

The novel begins when fifteen-year-old Tita falls in love with Pedro, who asks for her hand in marriage. However, Tita's mother, Mama Elena, forbids the marriage, claiming that because she is the youngest of her three daughters, Tita must remain a spinster so that she can care for her mother in her old age. Mama Elena suggests instead Pedro to marry her oldest daughter, Rosaura. Pedro agrees in order to remain close to Tita. Pedro and Rosaura have a son, Roberto, whom Tita cares for and then nurses when Rosaura is unable to produce milk. Having been born in the kitchen and primarily raised by Nacha, the family cook, Tita begins to take refuge there, where she soon discovers that her emotions can be expressed through the food she prepares.

Tita's cooking begins to affect her family, magically inducing tears and sexual desire. Tita's food proves particularly to be a shock in the case of her sister Gertrudis, whose heated body attracts a passing soldier. He rides away with her on horseback, and Gertrudis later becomes a general in the Mexican army. Being suspicious of Tita and Pedro, Mama Elena forces Pedro and Rosaura to move to San Antonio, Texas. Roberto dies, and his death drives Tita insane. She is taken from an asylum and nursed back to health by Dr. John Brown, who moves her into his house. When Mama Elena is injured in an attack by the rebel soldiers, Tita returns home to cook for her bitter mother, who suspected Tita was poisoning her and dies from an overdose of an emetic, she takes as an antidote.

Pedro and Rosaura come back for the funeral, whereupon Pedro and Tita begin an affair, though Tita has accepted a marriage proposal from John Brown. Certain that Tita is pregnant with Pedro's child, Tita ends her engagement to John Brown. Rosaura gives birth to a daughter, Esperanza, whom she intends to keep as a caretaker in her old age. Years later, when Rosaura dies from a digestive illness, Esperanza is left free to marry the son of John Brown, and Pedro is free to marry Tita. Aroused by the meal Tita has cooked, Tita and Pedro die in passionate union, setting the ranch on fire with the intensity of their love. At the end, it is only Tita's cookbook that remains in the ranch.

Avenues for the Transformation of Emotions and Actions

Tita, the lead character in Esquivel's novel, begins life fatherless. A tragedy indeed once one learns that her mother's warmth and ability to relate, rather than overpower was quite obviously completely snuffed out before Tita's birth. When Tita is just two days old, readers are told the shock of her father's death serves to dry up her mother's milk. Due to a tradition on her maternal side, Tita is condemned to a life of servitude because she is the youngest daughter and must care for her mother until death. It shows that Tita has no option to ever make a life of her own. Most children whose parents abuse their power over them can at least dream of the day when they are adults and out of the parent's environment. For Tita, there was no such hope presented to her.

Tita, the youngest of the three daughters, speaks out against her mother's arbitrary rule but 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 & passions are the impetus for expression & action, not through the normal means of communication but through the food she prepares. She is therefore able to consummate her love with Pedro through the food she serves. (de valdes 78)

Her odyssey into expression begins even in the womb, where she cried so hard and so often that when her mother's water broke, and the fluids evaporated, there was salt left to fill a sack that fed the family for many years. She was born right on the kitchen table and was quickly handed over to a servant to be fed. These circumstances foreshadow her role as the family's cook. Ironically, she is given the responsibility to provide nourishment to those who have denied

it to her. Tita is all but starved of any emotional validation and support besides that from Nacha, the servant who sustains her.

Nacha enables Tita to spend her formative years in the kitchen. She receives what presumably her sisters are totally denied – nourishment for her soul, being imparted with great culinary skills. Cooking gives Tita the power of communication and an outlet for her emotions. She is taught to release her emotions into the food that she is preparing. Nacha is a catalyst in the chemical reaction that gives her the ability to express. Esquivel's use of relationships, food, magical realism and the Mexican Revolution are the various aspects, in which the author constantly focuses on the importance of communication.

Internal and External Revolutions

Through the setting of the Mexican Revolution, Esquivel compares the struggle occurring outside the house to that of the events inside the house. In an interview with Laura Esquivel, she states her position on the significance of the situation and conflicts outside the household: "As a very young girl, I understood that the interior activities of the home are as significant as the exterior activities of the society". (O'Neill 8) This statement delivers the hostile climate within the De La Garza household where communication is oppressed. Mama Elena and her dictatorial ways ultimately create the oppressive situation in her home; the more she tries to control, dispirit, and undermine, the more she arouses the spirit of rebellion.

One ordinary day, Tita cooks an exquisite meal which results in the seduction of her sister, Gertrudis, to a life of freedom and pleasure-seeking after a lifetime of being denied the right to express herself. When Gertrudis returns to the ranch, she feels real grief when Tita informs her of her mother's death. Even though she worries, she misses the opportunity to flaunt her success and her break with all traditional values.

Tita rebels against her mother's suppression in her own way - by channeling her energies into her cooking and other household chores. She uses the situation that binds her for creative expression and she is talented at doing so. Her mother's death liberates Tita, but she is haunted by her mother's ghost. She dismisses her mother's haunting ghost by saying "I know who I am. A person who has a perfect right to live her life as she pleases. Once and for all, leave me alone; I won't put up with you! I hated you, I've always hated you". (Esquivel 199) With this, she both takes back the right to define herself and is finally able to communicate the truth of her feelings about her mother.

Rosaura's rebellion was wholly subconscious. Her emotions became repressed and this repression usually leads to grave illness and finally her early death. Gertrudis escapes all at once, Tita stays, fights and ultimately triumphs and Rosaura's only escape is through her own death. Fundamental change generally demands all manner of battles and sacrifices, whether it is a family or a whole nation. There was an enormous cost exacted on this family, but indeed their generation brought down familial dynamics entrenched for many generations.

Esperanza lives a very different life than her mother and aunts had to. When Tita banished Mama Elena's ghost, she banished the intolerable and stultifying dynamics of the

control and domination of children by parents for all generations that would follow them. A great deal of the story's originality is in how the author interviews recipes at various times throughout the tale. The recipes that are featured in the beginning of each chapter allow the reader to imagine how the author will interweave each ingredient or each creation to symbolize communication. Each recipe is explained and used as a mode of communication throughout the chapter. "Like a story, a recipe needs a recommendation, a context, a point, a reason to be". (Leonardi 340) Tita and some of the other characters have ways of processing events by using the culinary instruction that is so familiar.

Food touches everything. Food is the foundation of every economy. It is a central Pawn in political strategies of states and households. Food makes social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradiction. Eating is an endlessly evolving enactment of gender, family and community relationships. (Van Esterik)

Use of Magical Realism

The author's use of magical realism seems a very creative way to express certain truths as well as evoke powerful emotions. It is like an elaborate form of embellishment or exaggeration, often to give emphasis to the underlying emotions of the parties involved – as if the emotions themselves were capable of producing truly fantastic results.

When the salt residue from the tears is swept up, it fills a ten-pound sack, which will be used for years of cooking. That detail, reminiscent of various odd storms in Garcia Marquez, sweeps the reader into a magical-realist narrative in which supposedly futile emotions are shown to have mythic and historic power. (Januzzi 245)

The author also uses magical realism to show an outside manifestation of dynamics occurring within the family. Tita's tears and sadness infused into the cake's frosting at Rosaura and Pedro's wedding: "Mama Elena, who hadn't shed a single tear over her husband's death, was sobbing silently". (Esquivel 390) Her sadness affects all, who are present at her sister's wedding mentally and physically. When Pedro gives Tita the bouquet of roses which turns out to be a major faux pas, she cannot bring herself to throw them away and yet she has to find something acceptable to do with them. She decides, inspired by the spirit of Nacha, to use them in a meal.

Her cooking absorbs her emotions and evokes them in those who taste her cooking ... her sister Gertrudis takes on Tita's lust after eating the quail made with roses Pedro gives her and must act on it with a soldier; and, because her sole is made in Pedro's presence, it makes the guests at her engagement party euphoric. (Schroeder 149 - 150)

Rosaura has no milk to give the baby and is in a severely weakened state from the difficult labor. It falls to Tita to figure out how to nourish Roberto. She has to do for him what Nacha had to do for her. The baby is so distraught from hunger; she gives him her breast to pacify him, so she can have time to think. When she sees the boy's face slowly grow peaceful

and when she hears the way he was swallowing, she begins to suspect something extraordinary had happened. Tita, the provider of nourishment for the family, transcends normal biological laws in order to satisfy Roberto's hunger.

Revolution, Food and Magical Realism

The author uses the Mexican Revolution, food and magical realism as ways in which the characters can express their need for communication. In order to survive and flourish, all things in a living system has to remain in communication of some kind with one another. They have to remain open; open to receive what they need and open to change in the environment so that they can adapt if necessary. Mama Elena's controlling domination was the cause of enormous grief to those under her roof. Rosaura's denial killed her; it caused Tita to live a life, in the end, spent on others without getting to truly enjoy her own life. Gertrudis got out, but she too paid a cost; estrangement from the family members she loved. By teaching Tita how to cook, Nacha gives Tita an integrated outlet for the creative expression of her feelings.

Upon examining the various ways communication is expressed throughout the novel, one can surmise Esquivel's purpose for writing *Like Water for Chocolate* may be to demonstrate how important communication is; and when there is oppression of one's ability to communicate, it will come out in any form it can. Each aspect of the novel is a tool for communication. The ever-present theme of food in addition to magical realism, relationships and the Mexican Revolution setting, were mere avenues that Laura Esquivel took to discuss communication.

The use of food in the novel is the strongest mode of communication for Tita. This mode of communication is the only way Tita has been taught to express herself. The author uses magical realism throughout this novel as a method or outcome of communication. In some instances, it defines *Like Water for Chocolate* as the meaning states, it is "Water at its boiling point". When the characters are at their wits' end, one can see this form of communication. Tita's tears in the cake produce tears from all who consume it; and in one last use of magical realism, Tita and Pedro set the ranch on fire upon the consummation of their love. The intensity of the need for communication is so great that it can only be revealed as magical realism.

Conclusion

Esquivel transforms the mode and the significance of communication as a concrete foundation in the world of literature. On the other hand, this paper analyses the intensity of emotion of the characters with the emancipation of real existence. To refuse leading a life under suppression, one can definitely reject it through bold communication.

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