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The Significance of Tita's Feminine and Transformative Power in Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate*

Lindsay Linning

We can analyse Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* as a novel which delivers a message of female emancipation impeded by the shackles of tradition. In this extract of my dissertation, I examine the plight of the protagonist, Tita, by considering the roles played by the kitchen domain and her mother and sister in her plight as a female struggling for liberation. In *Como agua para chocolate*, Tita's outcry for a voice of her own from within the kitchen realm contends with the voice of the patriarchal society of the early 20th century Mexico as embodied by her mother, and it is this conflict which generates scope for feminist analysis of the novel. Therefore, I aim to demonstrate that Tita is instrumental in projecting the novel's feminist message.

1) INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* has enjoyed an unequivocal success in both the Mexican and international markets since its publication at the close of the 20th Century and into the new millennium – a pivotal period in terms of the development of the modern Mexican female's status within society. As Catherine Davies acknowledges, works such as *Como agua para chocolate* centre around the household and bring to the reader's attention 'important, often controversial, social and economic issues [...] Most importantly, all these

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novels address such issues from a woman's point of view'.¹ It forms a cardinal part of modern Latin American literary tradition which strives to address women's identities, applied within the context of the Mexican Revolution at the turn of the Twentieth Century. The novel promulgates a deeply feminist statement through the presentation and acknowledgment of the reality of the challenges facing females during this turbulent period in Mexican society. From a retrospective position the image of the emancipated modern Mexican woman is juxtaposed against the suffocating and constricting roles for females, characteristic of the Revolutionary period.

Esquivel constructs the self-sufficient Ranch community as a femino-centric microcosm of Mexican society where the woman takes precedence and is depicted against her male counterparts as 'an equal participant and, more frequently, higher up in the level of command, dominating all the various aspects of society'.² In an entirely female milieu, it is Tita's relationships with her mother and sisters which provide the greatest scope for analysis as she bears the burden of tradition perpetuated by Mama Elena. These dynamics serve as the catalyst for the key events of the novel, which have serious ramifications not only for Tita, but for her sisters too. Amidst the tangled De la Garza construct, how do we relate to this heroine? Why do we consider her precisely as a heroine? She proves challenging to interpret, yet is nonetheless the character through whom we are best able to decipher Esquivel's pervading messages concerning feminism and the female's role in Mexican society.

The essential areas for interpretation of these issues include the subjugation suffered by Tita and her subsequent liberation under her mother's dictatorial domestic regime and the motivating forces behind her. Food and the female art of cooking are placed at the core of this struggle and emancipation. As the

¹ Catherine Davies, 'Gender Studies', in *The Cambridge Companion to The Latin American Novel*, (ed.) Efraín Kristal (Cambridge, 2005), 90

² Jeffrey Oxford, 'Unmasked Men: Sex Roles in Like Water for Chocolate', in *Laura Esquivel's Mexican Fictions*, (ed.) Elizabeth Moore Willingham (Eastbourne, 2010), 76

dominant metaphor throughout the novel, food becomes a tool to expose women's capacity to address the inequalities that percolate numerous areas of their lives. Paradoxically, Tita's relationship with food is at once entrenched at the core of her suffering and also of her liberation due to her feminist response to her situation. Significant too is her sister Gertrudis's response to Mama Elena's regime. The authoritarian environment invokes radically different responses from the two sisters who are construed as a united force. Tita's on-going conflict with her remaining sister, Rosaura, a mere incarnation of their mother, results in the destruction of the cycle of subservient female responsibility as she educates Rosaura's daughter, Esperanza, under her own terms. These pivotal elements of *Como agua para chocolate* produce a valuable historical insight on the steadily changing status of the female voice in the Mexican State. The disputes arising within this fully female community are emblematic of the conflicts that have faced, and continue to face, women across Mexico and indeed on the global scale. What are the overarching lessons we can absorb from a feminist reading and interpretation of the novel? Tita's reaction to her fated circumstances speaks to generations of women as she negotiates and subverts the prevailing cultural ideologies which grip Mexico.

2) TITA'S SUBJUGATION BY HER MOTHER

Nuala Finnegan's critique of Mexican poet Rosario Castellanos depicts female familial dynamics as 'mother against daughter, sister against sister, women against women in an inexorable cycle of revenge and betrayal'.³ This tension between women only undermines female unity, and dominates the female relationships on the Ranch. It is Mama Elena's role at the heart of the Ranch society and her particular relationship with Tita that provides the greatest scope for feminist analysis in the novel. Her preservation of an austere, age-old tradition stipulates that her youngest daughter, Tita, is committed to a lifetime of parental care and prohibition from marriage. In a further attack, she goes on

³ Nuala Finnegan, *Monstruous Projections of Femininity in the Fiction of Mexican Writer Rosario Castellanos* (New York, 2000), 5

to enslave Tita to the realm of the kitchen, forcing her to adopt the role of family cook. It is from within this sphere that Tita manages to elevate herself into a liberated realm with her own individual identity upon the novel's conclusion. Mama Elena serves as Tita's chief antagonist and she is, essentially, the very antithesis to the core values of feminism. She morbidly blocks all the liberties of her daughter, limiting her to the sole creative outlet of cuisine, an activity customarily ascribed to women. In this sense, she rigidly conforms to society's constructs of gender roles by wholly repressive means.

Mama Elena fulfils the role of 'matriarch-patriarch.' Her merciless image of brutality even serves to unnerve the Revolutionary soldiers who threaten the ranch to whom she casts a 'severa mirada'.⁴ It percolates to the Captain of the soldiers that 'con Mamá Elena no valían las chanzas, ella hablaba en serio, muy en serio'⁵. It is this penetrating glare of Mama Elena's, recurrent throughout the novel, which communicates more effectively than words the ferocity of her spirit. From the novel's onset Esquivel describes how 'Mamá Elena le lanzó una mirada que para Tita encerraba todos los años de represión que habían flotado sobre la familia'⁶. It is this gaze that 'subjects Tita with the same weight in which the male gaze objectifies women'.⁷ In her role as leader and without the weight of the male gaze in the Ranch environment, Mama Elena adopts the dominant male role which has serious consequences for Tita. Her position within the patriarchal family dynamic relates to John Berger's observations that 'traditionally woman has already lost herself, for she has seen and been seen as

⁴ Laura Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate* (New York, 2001), 90: '...a fierce, domineering look'.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89: '...the captain could see you didn't fool around with Mama Elena, what she said was serious, very serious'.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9: 'Mama Elena threw her a look that seemed to Tita to contain all the years of repression that had flowed over the family'

⁷ Miguel A. Segovia, 'Only Cauldrons Know the Secrets of Their Soups', in *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture & Chicana/o Sexualities*, (ed.) Alicia Gaspar de Alba (New York, 2003), 163-178 (esp. 165)

a function of the (usually, but not necessarily male) spectator/dictator, whose desires she continually tries to anticipate'⁸.

As a consequence of her mother's behaviour, Tita is reduced to the status of voiceless 'Other.' She is coerced into unwillingly adopting a role imposed on her by her mother throughout *Como agua para chocolate*, manifested through her repressed emotions and desires. The male-like gaze and the authoritarian regime in place compound to rob the last vestiges of Tita's identity; after all, Mama Elena's forte lies in 'partir, dismantelar, desmembrar, desolar, destetar, desjarretar, desbaratar [y] desmadrar'⁹. The silent mask Tita must adopt and shield herself behind is a direct product of her mother's brutality and the subjugating cultural codes that suppress them both as women. Such destructive tendencies from Mama Elena and her inclination to victimise is a direct consequence of her own prohibition from marrying the man she loved in her youth. She therefore falls prey to the prevailing values of her generation, eventually embroiling herself in misogynistic cultural practices. This strips her of any true female or feminine tendencies, as she venomously dismisses 'todo lo relacionado con el mundo de la sensualidad y de los instintos femeninos'¹⁰. By perpetrating this custom, she is at once victimiser and victim; entangled in a web of self-destructive and out-dated practices, sacrificing her daughter's happiness and fulfilment in her all-consuming bitterness. Tita's castigation by her mother proves to be particularly compelling as her confinement negates one of the key principles of feminism – the freedom of the female to live according to her own mandates.

⁸ Cited by Sharon Magnarelli, 'On Griselda Gambaro's 'El despojamiento'', in *Latin American Women's Writing: Feminist Readings in Theory and Crisis*, (ed.) Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies (Oxford, 2004), 34

⁹ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 97: '... dividing, dismantling, dismembering, desolating, detaching, dispossessing, destroying [and] dominating'

¹⁰ Ana Ibáñez Moreno, 'Análisis del mito de la madre terrible mediante un estudio comparado de *La casa de Bernarda Alba* y *Como agua para chocolate*', *Espéculo: Revista de estudios literarios*, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (2006)

<<http://www.ucm.es/info/especulo/numero32/mitomad.html>> [accessed 5 October 2011]

Mama Elena's character enables the reader to consider gender as a product of the society we live in. She vehemently proclaims her radical outlook to Padre Ignacio, whose closest relationship ironically is with the quintessentially male image of God, 'Nunca lo he necesitado para nada, sola he podido con el rancho y con mis hijas. Los hombres no son tan importantes para vivir padre'¹¹. Undoubtedly she conveys a fiercely independent image and ardent resilience during the turmoil of the Revolution. Indeed, through her character we are offered a potential vision of a hypothetical society in which gender boundaries are blurred; one in which 'women and men [are] individuals, [...] Real women [...] may have 'masculine' attributes such as strength and courage, just as real men may show 'feminine,' nurturing sides'¹². This radical shift of roles 'structure[s] [the] fictional society and appropriate[s] power within it'¹³. The Ranch is a microcosm world in which the stereotypically dominating and chauvinistic Mexican male poses little threat to the seemingly self-sufficient troupe of females, insofar as men are neither a regular nor a significant constituent in the novel's events.

In principle, the Ranch develops as a self-contained, efficient society governed by a woman, yet throughout the novel Tita remains chained to an existence embedded within this domestic domain by her mother and is never permitted to truly live by venturing into the public sphere in order to integrate with society. As Zubiaurre reminds us, 'Such lonely reclusion [and] severe discipline [...] make it difficult to read *Like Water for Chocolate* as a festive tale of romanticized female solidarity and belonging'.¹⁴ Esquivel denounces 'las normas sociales y [...] las tradiciones que han impedido que la mujer se realice como

¹¹ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 82: 'Men aren't that important in this life, Father'

¹² Kristine Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como agua para chocolate*', *Hispanic Review*, 63 (1995), 133-146 (esp. 143)

¹³ Elizabeth Moore Willingham, *Laura Esquivel's Mexican Fictions* (Eastbourne, 2010), xi

¹⁴ Maite Zubiaurre, 'Culinary Eros in Contemporary Hispanic Female Fiction: From Kitchen Tales to Table Narratives', *College Literature*, 33 (2006), 29-51 (esp. 40).

persona y elija el destino de su propia vida'¹⁵. The protagonist is aware of the plethora of injustices challenging her, and whilst she may be manifestly restricted and oppressed within the confines of her kitchen and of her gender, she recognises her situation and strives to conquer this subjugation.

3) TITA'S LIBERATION THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF FOOD

Our protagonist exists in a 'gigantesco mundo que empezaba de la puerta de la cocina hacia el interior de la casa [...] [y] le pertenecía por completo, lo dominaba'¹⁶. The parameters of the kitchen zone are extended through the powers vested in her culinary skills as she instigates many of the novel's crucial events. In theory, Mama Elena's castigation of Tita ironically sees a transferral of female power from matriarch-patriarch to the only viable motherly figure present in the novel. In theory, motherhood is usually equated with empowerment in the domestic family setting. However, whilst Tita is unable to claim the status of biological 'mother', her elevated position as ranch cook as prescribed by Mama Elena places her in the category of nurturer and provider, fulfilling the previously vacant role of compassionate 'mother' on the ranch. It is in performing this role of surrogate mother, albeit against her wishes, that Tita asserts her power in the private sphere¹⁷.

For example, when feeding Rosaura and Pedro's child, she is transformed and exalted by Pedro, becoming 'la misma Ceres personificada, la diosa de la alimentación en pleno'¹⁸. The affinity Tita has with Esperanza allows her to liberate the future generation and therefore she bears the greatest power to

¹⁵ Moreno, 2006: '...the social standards and... the traditions which have prevented the female from self-fulfilment as a woman and the ability to choose her life's destiny'.

¹⁶ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 5-6: '[a world that] was an endless expanse that began at the door between the kitchen and the rest of the house... [and it] was completely hers – it was Tita's realm'.

¹⁷ Nora Domínguez, *Latin American Women's Writing*, 34

¹⁸ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 77: '...Tita looked like Ceres herself, goddess of plenty'.

effect lasting change and rebellion in the Ranch. The kitchen adopts mythical qualities in response to this transformative potential, and indeed it morphs into a supernatural realm with Tita as its sorceress, generating a revolution for the De La Garza family in subsequent generations. Her cuisine adopts catalytic and magical qualities which render her as a shamanistic figure. Although Tita is confined to a historically 'female' role which does not typically extend outside the domestic context, her cuisine serves as the supernatural impetus for change in the stagnant ranch environment, insofar as she dictates pivotal incidents in the lives of those who consume her creations.

In *Como agua para chocolate*, the kitchen generates a new female dialogue and builds its reputation 'as a locus of female power'¹⁹. The products of Tita's enslavement serve not only as a source of sustenance and nourishment, but also of illness and even death. Accordingly, there is a literal transferral of the protagonist's emotions and sentiments onto the plates she serves up, with direct repercussions upon those who consume them. Paradoxically, in quarantining her daughter to the kitchen, Mama Elena effectively provides her with an empowering vehicle through which to express herself. Food becomes a channel of communication for the voiceless Tita and it eventually becomes the tool offering her an ultimate means of liberation from the overbearing figures in command of her life. In this sense, food forms a discourse in its own right for her; revealing her innately human nature. It is through this language that Esquivel's reader accesses a truly raw depiction of the reality of Tita's life against the turbulent backdrop of the Mexican Revolution.

This depiction is augmented by the consistent employment of truly visceral food imagery. For example, to illustrate her loneliness, Tita describes the feeling as akin to being the last chilli remaining after a dinner 'que contiene todos los sabores imaginables, lo dulce del acitrón, lo picoso del chile, lo sutil de la nogada, lo refrescante de la Granada, ¡un maravilloso chile en nogada! Que contiene en su interior todos los secretos del amor, pero que nadie podrá

¹⁹ Moore Willingham, *Laura Esquivel's Mexican Fictions*, xii

desentrañar a causa de la decencia'²⁰. The intriguingly unique language of food invites the reader of *Como agua para chocolate* to appreciate Tita's emotions at a more profound level. Food and cooking become 'an unspoken form of communication in a censored environment. Tita uses the gender role forced on her against itself, to subvert the old order from within'²¹. Cruel traditions disintegrate with the death of the mother and subsequent death of Rosaura; and it is the potent amalgamation of the ingredients in Tita's cooking which cause both of these dramatic incidents. The perpetual cycle of tradition is broken, and Tita is released from her interminable struggle. Mama Elena's authority remains omnipresent and 'aún después de muerta su presencia seguía causando temor'.²² However, Tita destroys the last vestiges of her mother through a final confrontation with her spirit, and 'La imponente imagen de su madre empezó a empequeñecer hasta convertirse en una diminuta luz'.²³ Tita's conjuring up of the family's traditional dishes is her most influential weapon as it is her sole form of self-expression; it enables her to elevate herself from her imposed constriction to a state of freedom where her own identity and autonomy are recognised.

The culinary discourse throughout the novel also expresses the violence contained within Tita which is targeted against the archaic cultural practices of this period in history. Cuisine is as intrinsic to Tita's individual identity as it is to the identity of the Mexican state as a whole, and the violent repercussions of her cooking which grip the ranch symbolise a microcosm of the violent protest against Díaz's corrupt governance shaking Mexico at the time of the Revolution. From a female and feminist perspective Esquivel depicts the

²⁰ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 57: '... which contains every imaginable flavour; sweet as candied citron, juicy as a pomegranate, with the bite of pepper and the subtlety of walnuts, that marvellous chilli in walnut sauce'

²¹ Catherine Davies, *The Cambridge Companion to The Latin American Novel*, 195

²² Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 160: '... even after she was dead her presence was enough to inspire terror'

²³ *Ibid.*, 200: 'the imposing figure of her mother began to shrink until it became no more than a tiny light'

marked juxtaposition of this violence within the domestic and political domains alongside the recurrent themes of human desire and sensuality underpinning the characters' lives. Mama Elena's brutal reign of the household causes Tita to develop her state of suffering into a metaphorical weapon; 'su mejor arma'.²⁴ Her ability to redefine her own voice by subversive means from the depths of her isolation within a kitchen, and to lever this voice in a dignified manner to an influential status by rebelling against the matriarch-patriarch constitutes a shift in power down the generations, signalling the introduction of a new order in Ranch life.

Tita demolishes patriarchal ideologies which have been inscribed upon her through society's entities of education, religion, and her family and therefore is no longer subscribed to a state of submission and dependence'.²⁵ She threatens the hegemonic cultural standard through her feminine qualities and skills which results in the demise of her mother and with her, the demise of a regime denying female autonomy and independence which once dominated their very society.²⁶ In doing so, Tita's character communicates to every female reader of *Como agua para chocolate* a reminder of women's potential; she becomes a voice for the voiceless. She encourages women to rise from within their realms in Mexico and beyond, to make their voices heard, and to address the vital societal change which needs to be initiated.

²⁴ Alberto Julián Pérez, 'Como agua para chocolate: La nueva novella de mujeres en Latinoamérica', in *La nueva mujer en la escritura de autoras hispánicas: Ensayos críticos*, (ed.) Juana Alcira Arancibia (California, 1995), 49

²⁵ Cathia Jenainati and Judy Groves, *Introducing Feminism* (Cambridge, 2007), 118

²⁶ Mama Elena's demise coincides with her loss of sanity, which proves ironic given her insistence that 'En esta casa no hay lugar para dementes!' (41). This theme is poignant in the works of Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik who addresses the subject of insanity and its relation to women's violence towards one another. In 'La condesa sangrienta' Pizarnik relates psychological illness with the capacity for violence and immoral reasoning, which correlates appropriately to Mama Elena's abuse of others from the elevated position of power she finds herself in. See Davies and Jones, *Latin American Women's Writing: Feminist Readings in Theory and Crisis* (Oxford, 2004), 5

4) TITA'S SISTER – A COMPLEMENTARY FEMINIST ROLE MODEL

Tita's sister Gertrudis provides a complementary feminist message of empowerment. Her suffering is akin to Tita's under the authoritarian rule imposed by Mama Elena and a lifetime without male influence gives rise to her and Tita's deep-rooted desire for male companionship, described as 'una inevitable curiosidad morbosa'.²⁷ She is able to satisfy her desires by means of escape from the Ranch to join the Army for the Revolutionary cause and work in a brothel, a decisive action which forms an outlet for her sexual prowess. Her defiance of Mama Elena enables her to 'calmar el fuego que le ha producido esa castidad impuesta'.²⁸ Esquivel's portrayal of her as the most radical and revolutionary of the De La Garza sisters corroborates the feminist overtones of the novel; she is at once the incarnation of masculinised female *soldadera* and sexually driven female predator. She possesses a multi-faceted character as she shifts from daughter to prostitute to married woman upon the novel's conclusion.

Through her, Esquivel challenges traditional notions of gender definitions as she does not prescribe Gertrudis to archetypically restrictive feminine roles. It is these societal 'norms' which women have been unrealistically expected to conform with throughout history and into the present day, regardless of culture, that Esquivel raises as a focal element of *Como agua para chocolate*. The stark juxtaposition of the domesticated and quarantined Tita with Gertrudis, who abruptly flees the ranch and familial constraints in a sexually driven flurry of fire and passion, leading her into the Army, obliges the reader to acknowledge the marked differences in the two women's life experiences. For both women, however, the root of their oppression is generated by Mexican cultural codes and it is their mutual recognition of this that unites them in a feminine consciousness.

²⁷ Moreno, 2006: 'an inevitable, grotesque curiosity'.

²⁸ Moreno, 2006: 'to calm the fire that this enforced chastity had provoked inside her'.

The progress of the two sisters entrapped by their mother and, in particular, by the cultural and historical context in which they find themselves, substantiates the popular feminist belief that women are victimised as a result of society's interpretations of the sex disparity between men and women, and their respective roles dictated by their gender.²⁹ Indeed Esquivel demolishes strictly defined sex definitions through her promising representation of Gertrudis who, in spite of her mother and demanding societal expectations, is able to break away from the limiting and often detrimental family unit in order to quench the 'fuego muy intenso [que se] quemaba por dentro'.³⁰ Her subsequent choice to marry after prostitution epitomises her free will and thereby offers a thoroughly positive hypothesis of female life which grants equal rights of liberty to both sexes. Notwithstanding Mama Elena's response to her actions, Gertrudis is not rejected or demonised by society for the life decisions she takes and this opens up the potential of a hopeful outcome for the future female members of the De La Garza family.³¹ Whereas Gertrudis physically fights on the battlefield to earn herself title of General, Tita realises that 'obtener el derecho de determinar su propia vida le iba a costar más trabajo del que se

²⁹ Cathia Jenainati and Judy Groves, *Introducing Feminism*, 117

³⁰ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 126: '... an intense fire burning [inside her]'.

³¹ It is appropriate here to cite the radical Mexican feminist Hermila Galindo de Topete, who played a pivotal role in the First Feminist Congress of Mexico in 1916. As a nonconformist freethinker, many of her views surrounding women's suffrage, rights to education and sexuality were opposed by conservative feminists of the generation. Amongst the most controversial of her statements at the Congress was the following: 'the sexual instinct prevails in woman in such a way and with such irresistible resources that no hypocritical artifice can destroy, modify or restrain it'. Esquivel's depiction of Gertrudis relates closely to this jubilant vision of women's sexual liberty, insofar as Gertrudis exhibits a sexual prowess comparable to that of the stereotyped Latino male. See Jocelyn Olcott, *Revolutionary Women in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Durham, 2005), 28–32

imaginaba. Esta lucha la tendría que dar sola, y esto le pesaba'.³² Both women must fight to master their own destinies and those of the future female generation. Gertrudis and Tita's endeavours open up the potential for feminist interpretation of the novel as they symbolise a feminine perspective of the Revolutionary period in Mexican history in which examples of female integrity, strength and endurance take on many guises and forms, often in an implicit rather than overt fashion.

Critic Vincent Spina makes an insightful observation regarding the nature of the relationship between Tita and Gertrudis, observing the degree to which their characters complement one another and the conflicting forces that serve to unite them:

It is as though the kitchen itself (rather than Mama Elena) becomes the 'maternal' space, a dynamic area in which the process of creation and destruction contend with each other, ultimately to complement each other and become a whole. Just so, Gertrudis's life resonates with the same contention. In her role as military leader she is a destroyer. Yet her affiliation with the kitchen and with her sister Tita aligns her with the creative aspects of the creation/destruction complex.³³

The two sisters form a complementary team bonded in their suffering by their sisterhood. It is from within Tita's kitchen that Gertrudis grows to find a reassuring familiarity and comfort, stating 'La vida sería mucho más agradable si uno pudiera llevarse a donde quiera que fuera los sabores y los olores de la casa

³² Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 168: '... the right to determine the course of one's own life would take more effort than she had imagined. That battle she had to fight alone, and it weighed on her'.

³³ Vincent Spina, 'Like Water for Chocolate and The Silent War', in *Imagination Beyond Nation: Latin American Popular Culture*, (ed.) Eva P. Bueno and Terry Caesar (Pittsburgh, 1998), 215

materna'.³⁴ The 'kitchenspace' assumes a maternal quality and reassurance, with the cuisine it generates feeding her impulses to rebel against the cultural constraints imposed on her. The potent effect of Tita's food on Gertrudis proves so strong that it acts as a catalyst in her escape from the ranch, and in a frenzied and brazen flurry she flees naked, 'endowed with incredible sexual prowess'.³⁵ The impact of Tita's rose petal and quail dish upon Gertrudis serves as a fine illustration of potent magical realism. Tita's emotions of loneliness and desire are literally served up for consumption, and as a consequence Gertrudis finds herself overwhelmed with an insatiable amorous longing. Food generates a line of communication between the two sisters and assists Gertrudis in her crusade to satisfy herself with men. The aforementioned dish of Tita's unleashes the stifled passion contained within Gertrudis and so 'allows her – or impels her – to pass from the private realm of history [...] to the national stage of history as an officer in the Revolution'.³⁶

The revolution Tita initiates from within her kitchen and the subsequent role Gertrudis plays on the battlefield are demonstrative of the sisters' use of their different aptitudes, but to the same propitious effect. Prominent feminist author Naomi Wolf claims an elemental aspect of women's difficulties concerning gender parity coincide with their reluctance to attain the necessary power to affect change which 'strips women of many of the identities of femininity that feel right and comfortable'.³⁷ Yet in her depiction of Tita and Gertrudis, Esquivel creates two females who present, and most importantly, embrace distinct, alternative models of femininity through their life decisions. Their defiance and rebellion against normative culture typifies an ardent commitment

³⁴ Esquivel, *Como agua para chocolate*, 179: 'life would be much nicer if one could carry the smells and tastes of the maternal home wherever one pleased'.

³⁵ Ibsen, 'On Recipes, Reading and Revolution: Postboom Parody in *Como agua para chocolate*', 235

³⁶ Pérez, *Laura Esquivel's Mexican Fictions*, 218

³⁷ Naomi Wolf, *Fire with Fire* (London, 1993), 249

to generate positive advancement at home and in wider society, thus serving as the manifestation of a pure female power.³⁸

Within their respective circumstances, both Tita and Gertrudis create their own history. They symbolise the foundation of change in Mexican society; one in which the outspoken, empowered female has a role to fulfil. Both sisters serve as metaphors for the plight of the Mexican female and of her release from society's shackles over the tract of time. Although Tita herself does not fully infiltrate into the public sphere, her food stimulates Gertrudis to make the decisive move into the outside world, typically exclusive to men. Via the language and subsequent bond established by cuisine, Tita and Gertrudis are able to penetrate the male sphere of influence, becoming the very image of 'la mujer sensual, seductora y peligrosa, [que] es también mujer libre, creativa, revolucionaria'.³⁹

Tita proves that women need not passively accept their subjugated predicament and can, like the protagonist, exploit the necessary culinary ingredients by chopping, stirring, shaking up and dissecting the cultural standard to establish a

³⁸ In the analysis of Tita and Gertrudis it is appropriate to highlight Naomi Wolf's definition of 'power feminism'. This form of feminist thought 'encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice in a collective identity, for only strong individuals can create a just community. [...] [She] seeks power and uses it responsibly'. This feminist stance demonstrates a move away from 'victim feminism' as it acknowledges the opportunities for equality in society that must be, and can be, grasped by *women*. However, there are limitations to this avenue of feminist thought when poorer, less privileged females who have significantly fewer opportunities than their middle class, educated, white equivalents are taken into consideration. This merges into the field of *intersectionality* that examines the combination of factors which hinder individuals, such as race, class and education, which could be an interesting avenue for analysis in terms of *Como agua para chocolate*. See Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, (London, 1993), 147 – 156, and Grabham et al (eds.) *Intersectionality and Beyond: Law, Power and the Politics of Location* (London, 2008)

³⁹ Pérez, *La nueva mujer en la escritura de autoras hispánicas: Ensayos críticos*, 55

personal revolution of their own. Tita fertilises and grows the seeds of change in order to feed them to her family. These seeds, containing the essence of her outcry for autonomy, can be used to poisonous and potent effect. By extracting and subsequently removing the corrupt and detrimental influences of her mother and Rosaura who have persecuted her, Tita vanquishes the two victimising patriarchal agitators present in the Ranch environment and promotes Getrudis's flight from familial confinement via her cuisine.

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