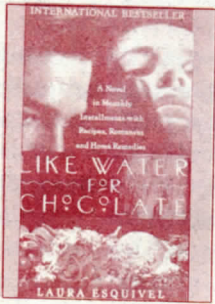


# Tradition and Power as Woman's Destiny

by Flor C. Caagusan



Like Water for Chocolate  
Laura Esquivel, author  
translated by Carlo Christensen and  
Thomas Christensen  
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During the Mexican revolution in the early 1900s, there lived a simple woman named Tita de la Garza. She was “the last link in a chain of family cooks” over generations in the De la Garza ranch.

Family tradition dictated that, as the youngest of three daughters, 15-year-old Tita had to take care of her Mama Elena until death. Marrying her suitor Pedro Muzquiz was forbidden. Dona Elena de la Garza sealed Tita's fate by getting Pedro to marry her second daughter Rosaura instead. Over the next 24 years, Tita had to learn the recipe to heal the icy chill that blasted her soul that day.

Tita's lifelong struggle is the main ingredient of *Like Water for Chocolate*. As it simmers to boiling point in the novel's plot of forbidden love, we recognize women's “fate” in patriarchal society.

Tita doesn't comprehend the “unknown forces” behind her mother's decision, although she questions

them throughout her life. These forces are concentrated in her family. Most deeply rooted through the generations is obedience to parental authority, which Mama Elena embodies and enforces on Tita by criticism, scoldings and beatings.

Sexual taboos even in marriage are symbolized in Rosaura's blinding—white bridal sheet with its delicately embroidered opening “designed to reveal only the bride's essential parts while allowing marital intimacy”. The codes of monogamy and family/male honor exact a heavy price when violated: Tita's father dies of a heart attack on learning about her sister Gertrudis real paternity. Mama Elena, too pays the price of hardened bitterness over lost love, herself becoming a destructive authority figure.

Tradition is formalized in the customary practices that chain Tita to kitchen labor: engagements, weddings, baptisms, funerals, holiday celebrations. A host of rules for proper behavior on these occasions are dictated by Carreno's etiquette manual, in the same way that Tita must obey Mama Elena's rigid instructions for cooking and her command to behave “like a decent woman”.

But living in the same household with Pedro, Tita experiences the progressive stages of sexual intimacy in their brief erotic encounters. Tita becomes aware of her own sexuality and so saves herself from the total self-alienation that afflicts Mama Elena. Her secret



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relationship with Pedro also becomes Tita's lifeline, against the constant inner chill, to other family relationships and roles other than cooking. Though she feels lost and lonely, like "the last chile in the walnut sauce left on the platter after a fancy dinner", Tita becomes the living spirit of women's power to nurture and heal others.

Tita's cooking not only is unsurpassed. It creates situations that change or end other's lives, and in turn alter the course of her fate. Her repressed desires, bitterness and hatred, and her occasional joys mix, unintentionally, into the food she cooks, driving all who eat this into acute symptomatic attacks and unforeseen actions. Only Tita is protected from its toxic effects.

Thanks to Tita's "Quail in Rose Petal Sauce", her sister Gertrud is eventually finds freedom in Pancho Villa's revolutionary army. That recipe is Tita's contribution to the historical forces of change that overturn the status quo in Mexican society. While Gertrudis rises to become a commander, Tita goes through the ordeal of subverting tradition from within the family walls.

Healing and saving lives during crises is the other of Tita's spiritual gifts. Wise women guide her from the unseen otherworld—the old cook Nacha and the Kikapu healer "Morning Light". They symbolize the magical traditions that women have been practicing for ages within the dominant patriarchal order.

Only after Tita exorcises the guilt and fear that silenced her rebellion is she able, willfully and defiantly, to change the fate of new generations of women in her family. She fights for the right of her niece Esperanza, daughter of Pedro and Roasura, to grow into her own future. Esperanza inherits from Tita "the secrets of love and life as revealed by the kitchen", along with the ancient art of cooking.

Like Tita, Esperanza's daughter has trouble with onion, for "once the chopping gets you started and the tears begin to well up, the next thing you know you just can't stop." It is through her voice that we read her great-aunt's life, flowing turbulently through the 12 traditional Mexican recipes that Tita recorded in her diary.

Reading the novel is like slicing through an onion. Its outer layer is the melodrama of undying passion. Beneath are the cycles of women's oppression and rebellion straining against the iron force of History. Tita de la Garza knew none of these big terms. she simply lived them for other women to improvise or make new recipes for their own liberation. Who can say where that process begins and ends?

