

The role of culture
and tradition in Laura
Esquivel's *Like Water for
Chocolate*...



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In today's well connected and wired world with the same brands and billboards dominating the skyline it is only every country's individual culture and traditions that are able to distinguish between them. Culture and traditions develop over a period of time. We learn of different cultures and traditions of different countries through their arts, food, lifestyle, traditional dresses and architecture. Most have developed over the centuries and are a reflection of their history. Both authors, though one writing a bittersweet love story and the other a political satire have based their stories on the culture of their native lands.

Laura Esquivel, a Mexican bases her story on the fact that traditionally the family's youngest daughter remains unmarried and spends her life taking care of her mother. The story revolves around Mama Elena's youngest daughter, Tita. Mama Elena is the dictatorial owner of the De La Garza ranch and is determined to see that her family traditions are maintained, even if they result in mayhem and destroy her own daughter's happiness. Nobel Laureate Marquez's novel One Hundred Years of Solitude has been hailed by The times Educational Supplement as "Garcia Marquez's hypnotic history of his Buendia family, founders of Macondo, a remote South American settlement, is a charged chronicle of fantasy and realism

. Farce and laughter vein his world... Marquez is a poet nearly, a seer, an alchemist...

a tour de force, enchanting, convoluted and barbarous. This book is the family saga of the Buendia family and of the town they founded, Macondo.

This book has also been hailed as the "Bible of Macondo". Tita,

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protagonist of *Like Water for Chocolate*, is the youngest of Mama Elena's three daughters. She is born in the kitchen and is informally adopted by the family cook Nacha and grows up in the kitchen in the tradition of great chefs and she grows up to be a master chef. Food as we all can attest is one of the most basic of traditions and is based upon local climate conditions and the vegetables, fruits and spices and other produce locally available, though over time this may have assimilated traits from outside influences. Mama Elena is a tyrannical matriarch, and when one day Tita tells her that a gentleman, Pedro would like to call on her, Mama Elena brusquely tells her that if it is to ask for her hand in marriage, she should tell him not to bother as it is a De La Garza tradition that the youngest daughter never marries but takes care of the mother till the day the matriarch passes away. Tita, knowing that a discussion is not permitted, still tries to protest and voice her opinion, to be rudely and shockingly told, "You don't have an opinion, and that's all I want to hear about it."

For generations, not a single person in my family has questioned this tradition, and no daughter of mine is going to be the one to start. Mama Elena's stand and her unwillingness to listen to Tita show us the strength of her convictions as well as her despotic nature. As we learn of this unfair tradition, a multitude of questions assail our minds, just as they do Tita's. Esquivel's writing makes us question, as to why and by who was this tradition started Was there any solution What if a woman had no daughters or no children at all, and then who would look after her in her old age What would happen to the daughter after the mother's death Most importantly, why would any mother insist on destroying her daughter's happiness

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Esquivel, through her writing, makes us question these old traditions, where the woman had no rights, where they were not allowed to make decisions concerning their own lives and happiness, where they were not even allowed to voice their own feelings or question the decisions others made regarding them. Tita is expected to quietly accept any decision her mother makes regarding her life. Another fact that emerges is that Esquivel is continuing in the great tradition of many of her South American female authors, in passing on the message of female empowerment.

She, like Isabel Allende tries to empower her female characters, and through them, pass on the message of female emancipation and equality to her readers. The world was so recent that many things lacked names, and in order to indicate them it was necessary to point. This line from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* shows us the magnitude of Marquez's book. If one was to go only by this line, we would immediately compare it to the Book of Genesis, which supposedly tells us, how God created the world. But on the other hand Macondo was established by Jose Arcadio Buendia and Ursula Iguaran, earning them a comparison with Adam and Eve. The founding of Macondo was necessitated due to the death of Prudencio by Jose Arcadio on being taunted as being impotent. In the solitude, after the founding, Macondo was able to develop its own culture and traditions. The Buendia family is intimately involved in each other's lives.

Due to the fact that they find Macondo and it is only a very small community to begin with, this looks normal and this is anyway, the norm in Spanish culture. In a lot of communities generations live together, sharing a common

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roof and kitchen, but in Macondo we see a tradition of solitude and incest developing. The paradox is that the basis on which Jose and Ursula are forced to go into exile is itself incest. Violence, military dictatorships and civil wars seem to be a South American tradition. The continent has suffered innumerable coups and armed conflicts; this is reflected not only in both these books but also in many others such as *No one writes to the Colonel*, *The House of The Spirits*. Literature mostly always reflects the ground realities of the author's homeland and these books faithfully follow that dictum. Aureliano joins the liberal forces in fighting the government and leads the rebel forces successfully earning himself the title, Colonel.

But towards the end of his life he comes to the bitter realisation that both sides are not giving up, not because of the defeat, it's just that they seem to be fighting for the sake of fighting. The bitter realisation sinks in that war never brings happiness and power is not the only thing worth living for. Both authors use their native culture and tradition to drive the plot of their novels and give us the reader a glimpse into the culture and tradition of their native lands, though some of may perceive it negatively, it is not intended as such. Traditionally coups and armed conflict have been part of their history and in Latin America women have traditionally held the secondary role to men, though today that has changed to quite an extent, partly due to the influence women authors like Laura Esquivel and Isabel Allende have had through their writing. BIBLIOGRAPHY: ??? LAURA ESQUIVEL LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE Doubleday 1992 ??? GABRIEL GARCIA MARQUEZ ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE Penguin 1996