

Questioning the traditions in like water for chocolate

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



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Introduction

Laura Esquivel's, *Like Water for Chocolate*, is set during the Mexican revolution. The men have left to be in the revolution and the women are left at home, keeping their families together. The traditions during this time period are being challenged and questioned whether they should continue the cycle or break it. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, Laura Esquivel demonstrates how traditions can limit self-growth.

The Tradition in the De La Garza Family

Esquivel's demonstrates how the traditions can limit self-growth and how they can lead to a rebellious state of mind within her female characters. Throughout her novel, *Like Water for Chocolate*, Esquivel displays her female characters as these extremely submissive souls that their tradition-forward mother rules. " For generations, not a single person in my family has ever questioned this tradition, and no daughter of mine is going to be the one to

start” (Esquivel 11). The tradition within the De La Garza family declares that the youngest daughter cannot marry and has to take care of the mother until death. This tradition is set on to Esquivel’s main character Tita since the day of her birth, making her the youngest De La Garza daughter.

This novel is set during the Mexican revolution, a time period in which women have no other choice but to left to fend for themselves yet at the same time want to keep their delicate spirits. The idea that the women during this time had to fit into led to a rebellious state of mind. The limitations that society set for them at the time caused them to break the cycle and change the way they lived. Growing up with these ideas and rules already engraved into a person can go one of two ways; the cycle continues or it breaks.

In Esquivel’s novel, Like Water for Chocolate, her protagonist wants to end the cycle, the tradition that has played such a big role in generations far before her. “ In this concept, each generation of adolescents, ‘ can and must revitalize each institution even as it grows into it’ ” (LeVine 426). The institution in which these children grow into can set the base for the person but at the end of the day, the person themselves have to decide what route in life they choose to take and what they are going to make of it. The decision is up to the person; whether keeping up with the tradition is a great idea or if breaking can allow others to prosper. The family can play a big role in how children grow up and what they choose to believe in. Along with the fact that family shapes children engulfing them during the earlier and most important stages of life.

The Conflict Between Mama Elena and Tita

Esquivel uses Mama Elena to symbolize and display the traditions of the generations prior to the birth of her protagonist Tita. “ You know perfectly that well that being the youngest daughter means you have to take care of me until the day I die” (Esquivel 10). Mama Elena is presented as this powerful, independent yet stubborn women who want her daughter to keep up with the tradition; although Tita has a different path in mind. Mama Elena has a strong hate for how Tita wants to go against their traditions and marry the love of her life. Tita wants to experience the freedom from her home, her mother and her traditions. Tita wants to know the world more than she has come to know; outside the realm, she knows in and out. During this time period, the women worry about what the people in town have to say about them, how society views them. Mama Elena wants to keep her social status within her town and doesn't want her daughter to be known as the ones that are going around breaking traditions which would leave the town with a lot to say about them.

Tita wants to thrive outside her home, outside of the people she knows and the family she has grown up with. The limitations that were put on her by her mother even before her time came to into full force the minute she found the love of her life. She wanted something that would've never passed due to rules that Mama Elena had set; Mama Elena deprived her of a normal teenage life. She always had those limitations, those traditions weighing her down. “ Looking across the cohorts of the women we have worked with and their mothers and grandmothers, it is clear that the culture of family life

changed drastically and that adolescents played key roles in that change” (LeVine 429). Usually, the younger generations are the ones that want to rebel against those ideas of the past generation.

Tita doesn't understand why she has to be cursed with such a sentence having no choice but to take care of her mother for the rest of her days; not allowed to have a life outside of her mother. “ Only Tita, whose mission it was to serve her until death, was allowed to be present during this ritual, to see her mother naked” (Esquivel 194). Esquivel shows Tita as this soft, delicate young lady who doesn't want to upset her mother so she allows herself to limit her ideas to what her mother believes in. This leads to that rebellion state of mind that causes Tita to break free of those traditions and allows her mind to grow beyond the house walls. Little by little Tita begins to show how she no longer wants to keep the traditions through her cooking. Her emotions for the love she wants to complete show through her cooking with the use of different ingredients along with the use of magical realism to show how her feelings transfer from her to the members of her family.

The Rebellion Against Culture

The culture dictates how women should act, how they should dress, what they can and cannot do in Esquivel's novel. “ Viewing culture as cohort-specific brings the culture concept close to the point at which it informs action, with a focus on how during their personal transitions may contribute to change the received transitions of their societies” (LeVine 427). Culture sets the base for what the individual considers to fit within the tradition but it shouldn't be the end of all things. Individual beliefs should dictate the

decision; traditions are based on mindsets of the different time period. Past ideals of sexism have set the foundation for these traditions that leave the youngest daughter to care for her mother; depriving her of the right to live freely, to love, to have a mind of her own without her mother.

Esquivel magnifies how these traditions can lead to rebellion which in turn limits the space for self-growth. “ While she was in her hiding place, she had prayed that nothing bad would happen to Mama Elena, but unconsciously she had hoped that when she got out she would find her mother dead” (Esquivel 93). Tita no longer wants to conform to her mother’s ideals, she wants her own persona outside of her home. Wanting to create her own life and family without having the limitations of her mother. Tita kept her delicate, soft persona to benefit around her mother; she used it to her advantage. Esquivel wants to display how women can have two different personas; how easily people can change based on the people that surround them.

Esquivel presents the women within her novel as a delicate and submissive presence that aren’t allowed to think for themselves. “ The roses are fragile, delicate, and thorny. They are capable of bringing great pleasure or pain” (Fernández-Levin 117). Within her novel, she shows how the young women struggle to keep up with the traditions of their authoritarian mother while still trying to allow themselves to grow without those restrictions gifted to them before their time. The restrictions have created an area for the rebellion to come out and allow the individual to think about more than what they were born into. Beyond what society allows them to believe in.

Traditions Restraining the Women

Esquivel's novel emphasizes how these traditions can restrain the female character and how they allow no room for self grow within Like Water for Chocolate. " The legal equally granted to all Mexicans, however, did not help improve the well-being of the indigenous groups which still constituted the majority of Mexico's population at the time of its independence " (Grote 167). Although Mama Elena can believe that making the right decision includes ignoring her family. It seems like she's doing herself a favor by not allowing her daughter to marry but she by completely ignoring the feelings of Tita. She can present herself with this picture perfect persona but on the inside, she can't avoid the real problems within her family. Overall freedom benefits the individual, there needs to be a line for the individual to know right from wrong in everyday life based on their individual beliefs.

Rebellion is a huge part of the teenage years; that's how people find who they truly are, what they believe in, their interest, every inch of themselves. " Here's what I do with your orders! I'm sick of them! I'm sick of obeying you!"(Esquivel 99). Rebellion although it can lead to trouble, it can also lead to great things. Tita during this time starts to think outside of her limit and starts to rebel against her mother's ideals. She's looking for bigger and greater things, more than just what was handed to her. She wants space to grow and flourish into the beautiful person she has always dreamt of. She knows finding love is within her reach, with how her older sister Gertrudis had the capability to get out of Mama Elena's rule and find someone who truly loves her.

Esquivel shows how these traditions can restrain the growth of an individual but it's the people that enforce the traditions that make it even more difficult to grow beyond them. " Despite recent attempts at legal reform, however, Mexico's indigenous peoples continue to suffer from a silent but pervasive discrimination in almost all areas of daily life" (Grote 164). The people that reinforce these traditions continue to limit the people around; making them fit into these boxes of picture-perfect people. All throughout time, people will continue to follow these traditions, they have never bothered to think outside the box. They wholeheartedly believe that these traditions are the best thing that has ever been created; but in reality, all they do is limit the way people act and live.

Esquivel presents how these traditions can limit self-growth within her female characters. " Creativity generates self-confidence, it empowers Tita to challenge her limitations and change the world that surrounds her" (Fernández-Levin 111). Tita wants to experience all the new things life has to offer, all the love she has always desired. This leads her to challenge the family traditions; she wants to experience love and believes that she has the right to it. " If Pedro has asked Tita to run away with him, she wouldn't have hesitated for a moment, but he didn't, instead, he quickly hopped onto his bicycle and furiously pedaled away" (Esquivel 157). Tita would've dropped everything to be with Pedro, to experience his love and be happy by his side. Esquivel paints Tita with this innocent, new to love vibe which results from her mother's hard ways. Love throughout this novel is painted as this beautiful, powerful and to Tita unattainable.

Esquivel develops Tita into this love craving person trying to get rid of those old traditions and wants a life outside of what she has come to know all her years. “ She realized that she was felling a new love; for life, for this child, for Pedro, even for the sister she had despised for so long” (Esquivel 173). Tita knows the limitations but she craves Pedro’s love, she wants what she can’t have. Esquivel puts Tita into this love-sick situation for Pedro, knowing that Pedro only married into the family for Tita but at the same time, unsure if he truly loves her. “ The narrative’s erotic theme has a dual purpose: not only does it point to the demands imposed by a physical necessity but also to the moment in which social order is disrupted” (Fernández-Levin 116). Esquivel displays the love between Tita and Pedro as this hidden, secret and at the same time young and playful experience. She wanted to show how the relationship between the two in a way of necessity to them and the disruption that occurs between them.

Esquivel shows how these traditions set within her novel can limit the self-growth within an individual. “ She affects a never-ending cycle because the basic elements that constitute food will eventually be reintegrated to their origins” (Fernández-Levin 114). Esquivel uses magical realism to show Tita’s real feelings through the dishes she prepares. Her feelings transfer into with the food making the people who eat feel the same way; everyone expects for Mama Elena who has a heart of steel compared to everyone else. “ He let Tita penetrate to the farthest corners of his being, and all the while they couldn’t keep their eyes off of each other”(Esquivel 52). Pedro allowed for his love for Tita to flourish while Tita had to hold back everything she had in her

heart. Tita would give Pedro every last bit of herself but the traditions within her family would no never allow her to do such a thing.

Esquivel shows how these traditions can limit the self-growth within her female characters and the power it has over them. “ She was convinced she would never love anyone again as long as she lived” (Esquivel 69). The tradition given to Tita made her believe that she wasn’t allowed to love beyond the family she was born into. The traditions put women into this box telling them what they can and cannot do; limiting even their thoughts. All these traditions do is tear down the dreams that people have created for themselves; it drags the individuals down to a mindset where they don’t believe they are worth it.

Conclusion

“ That’s the way history gets written, distorted by eyewitness accounts that don’t really match the reality” (Esquivel 56). Esquivel displays her female characters as these delicate and submissive people to show how the traditions set in place for them have limited how they can act and think. The traditions put the women into boxes and dictate every aspect of their lives. Esquivel demonstrates the limitations traditions can have on the growth of her female characters all throughout her novel, Like Water for Chocolate.