

The portrayal of
women as
consumable in tina
howe's 'the art of
dining' and laura...



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It is widely acknowledged that women have often been “ forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men” (Beauvoir 84). The woman is generally considered to be ‘ the other’ or the ‘ second sex’ and is used as a commodity for the carnal gratification of male desire. This essay aims to examine this truth, principally asking the question, ‘ are women’s bodies consumable?’ specifically in reference to the play ‘ The Art of Dining’ by American playwright Tina Howe, and to the film ‘ Like Water for Chocolate’ directed by Alfonso Arau and based on the novel of the same name written by Laura Esquivel. The essay will study the metaphorical trope of women as objects that have the ability to produce and also as objects that can be consumed, used, and ultimately exhausted, particularly focusing on these two pieces of literature.

In order to effectively form a response to the question of female consumption, the use of the word ‘ consumable’ must be clearly defined. In this instance, ‘ consumable’ can be understood to mean a commodity that is intended to be eaten, drunk, or used up. With this in mind, the consuming of femininity can be taken literally or metaphorically. The literal interpretation of women as consumable or even edible is clear when we consider physical acts such as breastfeeding, but this essay will take a metaphorical approach, looking instead at the examples of figurative consumption of female characters in the pieces.

The concept of metaphorically consuming women has been extensively studied by feminist theorists, writers, performance artists and more. For instance, in her study ‘ Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink’, Kim Hewitt writes about American performance artist and poet Karen Finley, who

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“ undresses matter-of-factly on stage and coats her body with raw egg and glitter, parodying the process of making the female body delectable, consumable, and desirable”. (p. 97) Finley uses her art form to make the same point that Esquivel and Arau make in theirs; that there is a mindset that holds “ women closer to the body and men closer to the rational” (Tiengo, 79), which creates a duality and a separation of women from men, in which the masculine ultimately and figuratively becomes the eater and the feminine becomes the eaten.

“ The Art of Dining” is a play in two acts that recounts the events that occur in one evening at a recently opened restaurant on the New Jersey shore. Throughout the play, Tina Howe uses food as a specific barometer for character; the identity of each character is defined by their appetite and attitude towards food. One such character, Elizabeth Barrow Colt, has a particular aversion to food and eating, which is rooted in her upbringing and particularly in her mother’s bizarre eating habits. In Act two, Scene two, Howe presents the reader with the first representation of the feminine form as consumable. David Osslow, a confident and well-dressed middle aged man is sitting with Elizabeth Barrow Colt, a near-sighted writer of extremely nervous disposition, “ in her early 30s and afraid of food” (Howe 6). As the director of his own very successful publishing company, David is meeting Elizabeth to discuss a series of short stories that she has written and that he wants to publish. During the meal, Elizabeth displays a sort of manic outburst, in which she details the ritual of mealtime she experienced daily as a child, describing her mother’s compulsive behavior at the dinner table; “ my mother played with [her food]: sculpting [her food] up into hills and then

mashing it back down through her fork”(Howe 52-53) and then continuing to say that “...before [they] sat down at the table she’d always put on a fresh smear of lipstick...a dark throbbing red”(Howe 52-53). Culturally and historically, lipstick and particularly red lipstick has been a major symbol of the feminine mystique and femininity in general, and in light of this, Howe’s depiction of the behavior of Elizabeth’s mother becomes considerably more profound to the reader when looking at the female form as consumable.

Elizabeth elaborates on her mother’s lipstick, describing how it “ rubbed off on her fork in waxy clumps that stained her food pink, so that by the end of the first course she’d have rended everything into a kind of ... rosy puree.” (Howe 52-53) The reader is left with a clear perception of the female as consumable here; the lipstick from Elizabeth’s mother’s mouth weaves its way in to the very meal that the family is eating, which is highly suggestive of her own femininity becoming intrinsically linked to her nourishment and operates as a metaphor for this same femininity to become edible.

It is also curious to note the use of lipstick as a way for femininity to become a consumable in another instance. Earlier in the same scene, while Elizabeth tries to apply a coat of lipstick to her lips, she drops the tube into her bowl of soup. She fishes in the bowl for the tube and, after eventually retrieving it, she passes the bowl to David, who eats the rest of the lipstick-tainted soup, bizarrely using Elizabeth’s spoon instead of his own. In this way, David becomes the consumer and Elizabeth becomes the consumed, as he devours her symbolic femininity and womanhood which have become linked with the soup by her lipstick. This is not an isolated incident of representing the feminine form as consumable in the play. At one point during the sixth scene

of Act two, Elizabeth recounts to David her mother's suicide attempt, " she turned on the gas and opened that big mouth of an oven door and stuck her head in"(Howe 84). Elizabeth's mother functions solely as a medium through which Howe can comment on the consuming of femininity, despite only being in the play as a memory of another character. Considering that she is a nameless, insubstantial character, this image of suicide by self-cooking is quite an arresting one to be provided with. While it is not technically a representation of woman as consumable, it certainly implies that she can become edible by being treated in the same way that we would treat food. This idea is even clearer as a metaphor, because Howe implicitly compares the mother to food when Elizabeth exclaims, "...her head [was] actually... cooking! ...almost having barbecued herself like some amazing delicacy... some exotic...roast!"(Howe 85) and once again, with a statement from the mother herself, "'I bet I would have tasted damn good!' she used to say, smacking her lips"(Howe 85).

In what seems to be the perfect segue, Herrick Simmons declares that "... breasts are life-giving" (Howe 88), a belief that is echoed in *Like Water for Chocolate*, specifically in the scene during which Tita breastfeeds her nephew, the child of her lover Pedro and her sister Rosaura. This is one of few examples of females as being literally consumable in either of these pieces. Her ability to breastfeed her nephew is miraculous and is just one of many examples of magic realism in the film and the book, as it can only be explained in a phantasmal sense. Esquivel justifies her ability to be literally consumed in two different approaches. Firstly, by illustrating that Tita feels an innate need to feed: " If there was one thing Tita couldn't resist, it was a

hungry person asking for food” (Esquivel 70) and by suggesting that this maternal instinct to nourish is of such an intense nature that it manifests in her body and enables “ her virgin breast to nurse her nephew”(Like Water for Chocolate), and therefore enables her body to become consumable. Secondly, by conceptualizing the consummation of Pedro and Tita’s love for each other through the shared experience of eating. This concept begins with a scene during which Pedro gives Tita a bunch of roses. She holds the roses to her chest, they prick her skin, and her blood falls on the petals, with which she cooks a dish of quails in rose petal sauce. Her passion, her intense and lustful craving for Pedro, and her whole being are infused in the meal and “ that is how she invade[s] Pedro’s body; voluptuously, ardently fragrant and utterly sensual.”(Like Water for Chocolate) It is through the experience of consuming Tita’s being during this meal that the lovers can metaphorically consummate their love, leaving Tita no longer chaste or barren, but fruitful and consumable; “ in one instant, Pedro had transformed Tita’s breasts from chaste to voluptuous without even touching them.”(Like Water for Chocolate) During this same meal, Gertrudis is so overcome with fiery lust upon consuming the edible manifestation of Tita’s passion that she sets the shower cabin on fire. She even begins to emit the same smell of the rose-fragranced meal, to which a Villista chief responds with an ardent fervor that is reminiscent of rushing to the dinner table upon smelling a delicious meal being laid out on it. In this way, it could be suggested that Tita is certainly not the only female character that is represented as consumable. As well as cooking the quails in rose petal sauce, Tita also cooks part of herself into many other dishes throughout the story.

Early in the film, the viewer watches Tita cry with anguish in to the batter of a wedding cake she bakes for her sister's wedding to Pedro. As in the case of the rose petals, her tears inject the food with the profound emotion they are produced by, and upon eating the cake, the guests at the wedding become instantly miserable, begin sobbing and eventually "[take] part in a collective vomiting spree." (Like Water for Chocolate) Likewise, Tita's chillies in walnut sauce make the guests at Esperanza and Alex's wedding overcome with sexual desire, as they eat this materialization of Tita's sensuality. In the opening chapter of the novel, the narrator explains that when Mama Elena chopped onions during her pregnancy, the sting of the onions would affect Tita's sensitive eyes so strongly that she would cry in the womb. This violent weeping would bring on an early labor, washing Tita into the world " on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor."(Esquivel 10) As well as being another sample of magic realism, this image once more renders the feminine as being literally consumable; " when...the water had been dried up by the sun, Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the ... floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten-pound sack - it was used for cooking." Curiously, in this instance it is not the female body that is consumable, but a product of that body that is consumed: a mixture of amniotic fluid and tears, a poignant but almost disturbing combination that evokes an overwhelming discomfort in the reader, who is forced to confront the distressing reality that is the representation of the feminine as consumable.

As examined, both *The Art of Dining* and *Like Water for Chocolate* deal with the representation of women's bodies as consumable in a consumer-driven

capitalist society, but treat the concept in different ways. *The Art of Dining* seems to highlight female consumption metaphorically, through the use of symbols of femininity and by exploring the ways in which the masculine can become the consumer and the feminine can become the consumed. While also reflecting on this metaphorical interpretation through its own brand of magic realism, *Like Water for Chocolate* also examines and provides examples of the female and the products of the female body as literally consumable, in the forms of the exclusively maternal acts of breastfeeding and childbirth. The female characters in the texts *Like Water for Chocolate* and *The Art of Dining* are represented as being consumed in a way that their male counterparts are not, and with this in mind, one can deduct that women's bodies are indeed literally and metaphorically consumable.

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