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Food as a Double-Edged Sword in Laura Esquivel's *Like Water For Chocolate*

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Naina A. Sabu

II MA English, Pondicherry University

Address for Correspondence: editojohp@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Indian aestheticians were one of the earliest scholars who traced out relationship between food and the world of literature. “Rasa”, the aesthetic flavour of any literary art has its origin from the culinary context where the word rasa meant 'essence', 'sap' or 'taste'. Though food is an inevitable component in the life of every living organism, until the wake of 19th century, food as a topic of interest in European literature remained dormant. By the wake of 20th century, food narratives and fiction which incorporated food as one of the central component gained importance.

Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel, published in 1989 is one such novel which captures the attention of the readers through culinary narration. In the novel, food acts as the essential catalyst in initiating many of the emotional bonds between the characters. Food also acts as a bridge between magic realism and the world of reality which plays within the novel. Any food is considered tasty, when it balances all the tastes it encompasses. Similarly, Laura Esquivel has balanced her artistic production by giving as much importance to the fact that the same element (food) can also create adverse effects in the lives of characters. Food has brought in strains in relationships which ultimately led to death. These two contrary yet balancing perceptions of food within the novel increases its reputation as one of the best food related fiction ever written.

Keywords: Food, emotion, food narrative, magic realism.

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One of the most well known proverb states, “The family that eats together stays together”. This proverb throws light into the importance of food, which surpasses the basic human bodily requirements. Food has the power to shape human behaviour and how an individual bonds with the rest of the world. Laura Esquivel's novel is one great example to show how food functions various positive as well as negative roles within human life. The novel was first published in 1989 in Mexico. The novel tells the story of a woman named Tita who falls in love with Pedro. Their love is unfulfilled since Tita is the youngest daughter, who according to the Mexican tradition was not allowed to marry because they had to spend their whole life serving their parents. The English translation of the text came up in 1992. The novel is set in the backdrop of Mexican revolution of 1910 to 1917.

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http://heb-nic.in/cass-studies	Quick Response Code:
Received on 20/02/2019 Accepted on 25/02/2019 © HEB All rights reserved	

The novel is narrated by a young adult, who unveils the story of her great aunt, Tita De La Garza. In Chapter I, the first description about every character is somehow related to their choice of food. The narrator is chosen to narrate the story, because they have the same reaction to onion. It says, “Mama used to say it was because I was especially sensitive to onions, like my great-aunt Tita” (1). Mama Elena is introduced as narrator's great grandmother, whose “milk dried up from the shock” of her husband's immediate demise (1). Nancha is described as the one “who knew everything about cooking”, who later took up the charge of feeding the infant, Tita. Tita's sisters Gertrudis and Rosaura are explained as people who were “just the opposite”. “Tita's world (kitchen) seemed full of unknown dangers and they were terrified of it” (2). This beginning where the author introduces characters along with their relationship to food and cooking gives the idea that the whole novel is under the grip of food and its effects on human beings.

According to Smith et.al. in their research paper titled *Orally Mediated Sources of Calming in 1-to 3-Day-Old Human Infants*, infant's bond with food starts very early and they associate food with soothing and social interaction. In the paper titled *Food for love: the Role of Food offering in Empathic Emotion Regulation*, E. Hamburg et.al. tries to show that food affects the empathic emotion regulation (EER) in individuals. The offering of food results in the regulation of emotional states in both provider and receiver. Emotions and expectations in the future of these children are highly indebted to their childhood regulatory interactions.

Comfort food is any “specific food consumed during a specific situation to obtain psychological comfort” (Wansink and Sangerman 66). According to Locher et.al. (2005), comfort food is of four different types. Nostalgic food, special dishes or cuisines which triggers one's earlier experience with the food. Secondly, indulgence food, which are either expensive or rich in nutritional value, which stands as status markers. Thirdly, convenience food which serves instant gratification of needs (potato chips or cheese cakes). Finally, physical comfort foods, which are comforting in texture and temperature (Hot soup). All these comfort foods play certain major roles. Primarily, it increases a sense of familiarity. Secondly, comfort foods are reserved for certain special occasions (when sad or happy). Therefore when one is consuming a type of comfort food, it is always backed by some emotion. Thirdly, comfort food which usually creates positive social interactions, when consumed while lonely increases a sense of belongingness. The breast milk is an essential comfort food to the infants.

In the novel, a reader can find Esquivel following the same pattern when she describes Tita the infant and the two babies of Rosaura and Pedro. The major comfort food mentioned in the novel is breast milk. In the beginning of the novel, narrator explains the situation into which Tita was born. Just after two days of her birth, her father died of heart attack. As a result of this sudden shock Mama Elena' milk entirely dries up. She do not feed Tita, but Nancha does. Here begins the emotional bonding between Tita and Nancha, whereas from depriving food to infant, Mama Elena became distant to Tita all throughout her life. Nancha was a person who lived in the world of kitchen. As an infant, Tita's nostalgic moments as a child lies with Nancha in the kitchen. This is one crucial reason why Tita later grew up to be an amazing cook with exceptional knowledge about how to cook any Mexican food.

In Chapter IV of the novel, the narrator explains the events followed after the birth of Pedro and Rosaura's first child, named Roberto. When Roberto was born Rosaura was too ill to breast feed the baby. The baby cried angrily all day and night. When Tita tried to calm the baby down the baby was “frantically trying to find the milk in Tita's breasts... When she couldn't stand it a moment longer, she pulled open her blouse and offered the baby her breast.” (33). At this moment Tita's aim was just to calm the baby down. But surprisingly, “The baby clamped desperately onto the nipple and he sucked and he sucked. When she saw the boy's face slowly grow peaceful and when she heard the way he was swallowing, she began to suspect that something extraordinary had happened” (33). The “extraordinary” event was that, Tita was breastfeeding the baby. In their paper, *Breastfeeding and Active Bonding Protects Against Children's Internalizing Behaviour Problems*, Liu et.al. points out that breastfeeding develops bond between the child and the mother . Or in the case of Roberto, he is breastfed by Tita and his love for Tita is maternal love, whereas his biological mother Rosaura is just an alien being to

Roberto. This explains how the emotion is regulated in the receiver or the infant. In the same manner, one can notice emotional changes in the provider or Tita as well. "The baby's cries filled all the empty space in Tita's heart. She realized that she was feeling a new love: for life, for this child, for Pedro, even for the sister she had despised for so long" (31). Tita who lived with emotional imbalance out of broken heart found harmony again, after becoming the 'provider' to Roberto.

In chapter 8, readers are given details about Rosaura's second child Esperanza's nursing. It was the time after Mama Elena's death. Rosaura was so bereaved that nursing child was impossibility to her. This time, Tita was afraid to create a maternal bond with Esperanza by giving her own breast milk. Therefore, "She chose instead to provide Esperanza with the same diet Nancha had used with her when she was a tiny baby: gruels and teas" (66). Just like Tita, Esperanza was soon accustomed to kitchen and the warmth of the fire within, as she was nursed by Tita all the time. This caused a problem, "She cried very, very loudly when she sensed that the warmth of the stove was no longer nearby, to such a point that Tita had to carry the stew she was cooking up to the bedroom, so they could fool the child, who was lulled to sleep by the smell and sensation of warmth from the pan Tita was using for cooking" (66). To the child, gruel was her comfort food. The food, its smell and the warmth of the storm was the maternal experience to Esperanza as an infant.

The food which is an essential component in determining the bonding between the characters and regulating their emotions, becomes a double edged sword by initiating deaths in the family of Tita. In Chapter V of the novel, the reader can find Tita who entirely misses her nephew Roberto, as he was taken away from Tita, intentionally by Mama Elena. Later in the chapter, Chenchu comes up announcing that Roberto is dead. Chenchu explains it in a line, "Well, your nephew; whatever he ate, it didn't agree with him and so, he died!" (45). Roberto's death was caused by some food which was provided to him, other than his comfort food, the breast milk of Tita. Though unknowingly, Mama Elena was responsible for the child's death. Here begins Mama Elena's fall and this loss of her esteem is symbolically represented through another instance of food. In the same chapter, it says, "Mama Elena and Chenchu finished filling the sausages in silence. Mama Elena was always such a perfectionist and so careful to get all the air out of the sausage, no one could explain it when they discovered a week later that all the sausages in the cellar were swarming with worms" (45). The perfectionist in everything was making mistakes enough to bring worm in their food, bonding and peaceful environment within the family.

In Chapter V, itself one comes across a second death due to improper intake of food. In the latter part of the chapter, where Chenchu reaches up to the dovecot to calm Tita, Tita was holding a dead pigeon. "She was trying to feed it some more worms. The poor thing probably died of indigestion because Tita fed it too much" (46). If Roberto died out of the lack of his comfort food, the baby dove died due to the excess of it. To heartbroken Tita, her only desire was to feed Roberto his comfort food. When she could not fulfil that desire, she might have considered the dove to be the embodiment of her nephew, to whom she fed to her heart's desire, but it killed the poor dove.

Another important death described in the novel is that of Mama Elena. In chapter VII, Mama Elena is forced to let Tita back into her house, since she is bedridden. Tita takes care of her mother appreciably well and prepares soup for her with great care. Yet, Mama Elena finds the food made by Tita to be bitter. She feared that Tita would poison her through food, because of which she made it compulsory that Tita should eat the food in front of Mama Elena to make sure that it is poison less. "Besides insisting that Tita taste the food in front of her, she always had a glass of warm milk brought to her with her meals, and she would drink that before eating the food, to counteract the effects of the bitter poison that according to her was dissolved in the food" (62). Mama Elena started consuming "syrup of ipecac and another of squill onion as a purgative"(62). But, at the end of another month Mama Elena passed away due to horrible pains and violent convulsions, due to excessive intake of ipecac.

Cibophobia is the condition where an individual persistently suffer from the fear of food. The word 'cibophobia' or 'sitophobia' is derived from the Greek *Sitos* which means 'bread' or Latin *cibo*, which means 'food' and *phobos*, the Greek word which means 'fear'. People suffering from cibophobia have increased anxiety levels regarding how the food is

prepared, who prepared the food and whether it might contain poison or not. Symptoms of cibophobia include compulsion as to which food to be prepared, how to be prepared and served to them, lesser intake of food due to anxiety, sleep disorders etc. Through her attitude towards food, one can reach to the conclusion that Mama Elena was suffering from cibophobia. It is not uncommon for cibophobic people to die out of over anxiety. It is her increased anxiety which forced Mama Elena to take Icepac syrup regularly, though she knew that it was not good for health. Finally, distrusting her daughter's food and sticking on to her own stubborn anxieties led to the death of Mama Elena.

One major element in the novel along with food is magic realism. Maggie Ann Bower in her text *Magic(al) Realism* (2005), explains that, "Its distinguishing feature from literary realism is that it fuses the two opposing aspects of the oxymoron (the magical and the realist) together to form one new perspective" (Bower 3). Magic realism is a most favoured form of writing by authors because it negates the basic conception of sticking on to reality. It confuses the rigid consciousness of human beings to ponder whether what they are reading is entirely true or entirely false. In case of *Like Water for Chocolate*, the magic realism within the novel begins with an incident relating to food. The incident is already explained, where Tita feeds Roberto with her breast milk, even though, she is a virgin untouched woman. "She removed the boy from her breast: a thin stream of milk sprayed out. Tita could not understand it. It wasn't possible for an unmarried woman to have milk, short of a supernatural act, unheard of in these times" (32). This was the first "supernatural" incident and it all began with the food. The presence of milk within the breasts of a virgin woman is not common in the real world. This presents to the reader a severe confusion as to whether it is a reality or a fantasy.

Chapter IX of the novel shows Mama Elena's ghost for a second time. This time, when Tita sees Mama Elena's ghost, the ghost was provoked by Pedro, who came back home drunk to announce his love for Tita. Here, Mama Elena's ghost was not afraid of Tita's pregnancy, but was worried by the fact that Pedro had consumed alcohol. Alcohol has the ability to free a person from their social restrictions, to speak their heart out. Mama Elena worried that Pedro might make a fuss about losing his true love Tita, in front of Rosaura. This might create strains within the family, which Mama Elena wanted to prevent. Therefore, here also consumption of a certain drink has initiated the space for bringing back Mama Elena's ghost, to create the fantastic element which is much essential to the climax of the novel.

In Chapter X, there is another fantastic event, where the tamales do not get cooked even though Tita had kept it for long hours. The lines explain, "Something strange was going on. Tita remembered that Nancha had always said that when people argue while preparing tamales, the tamales won't get cooked" (103). It was a belief among certain Mexican households that if tamales are cooked in the midst of rift between people, even if they are kept for days upon stove, tamales will not get cooked, because "tamales are angry" (103). Tita never thought it to be true. But here, while she was preparing tamales she was having a word fight with Rosaura about Pedro and his love for Tita. This is another instance which confuses the reader as to whether it is possible in reality or is it mere fiction.

All these event sums up to the idea that food in the novel functions as both life giver and life taker. Food does not only play with life, but balances the relationship equations between the people within the novel. Food also has a greater role to play in the context of this novel because in many instances food stands as a catalyst to bring about fantasy and reality together within the course of the novel. It is also to be noted that Tita was at the centre of everything related to the food. For nearly everyone in the novel, she was the 'provider'. As the narrator explains, "It wasn't easy for a person whose knowledge of life was based on the kitchen to comprehend the outside world. That world was an endless expanse that began at the door between the kitchen and the rest of the house, whereas everything on the kitchen side of that door, on through the door leading to the patio and the kitchen and herb gardens was completely hers-it was Tita's realm" (2).

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