

THE DEFIANCE OF PATRIARCHY AND THE CREATION OF A FEMALE LITERARY TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD POPULAR FICTION¹

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Abstract

Laura Esquivel, Mexican, Joanne Harris, British, Fannie Flag, American, and Isak Dinesen, Danish, are women writers who have written contemporary world popular fiction: Like Water for Chocolate, Chocolat, Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café, and the short story 'Babette's Feast'. Out of their desire to reflect their female identity, these women writers of four different nationalities have concertedly rejected the long-running male literary tradition, in which male characters rule and dominate and, in turn, have created a female literary tradition in which their female characters not only assert a solid and secure place in the world but also are allowed to display their female strength, resourcefulness and

dominance. These contemporary women writers have brought about significant changes in contemporary fiction in which they terminate literary stereotypes and discard traditional female roles and 'untrue' images imposed on women. These women authors reduce the male role, ridicule male characters and reverse male authority. While lessening the male role, they increase the female role, make female characters the focus of their works, and reverse former traditional practice by portraying male characters as marginal, subordinate or complementary to female interests and desires. Besides, rather than penalizing 'bad girls' these authors reward 'bad girls' and in some cases allow them to prevail in the end. The women writers, furthermore, step over the boundary into the domain of art and create female characters who take the role of accomplished artists. Theme-wise these authors determinedly deal with such distinctive feminine concerns as food, cooking, and nurturing, traditionally treated as trivial and unimportant, by drawing attention to their universal significance and elevating them to serious literary subject matter.

Introduction

Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal — that is male-centered, male-oriented and male-controlled. Western civilization has been formulated and implemented with the subtly hidden intention of subordinating women to men in all domains: familial, religious, political, economic, social, legal, cultural and artistic. In patriarchal society it is believed that women are innately and inevitably inferior to men in both physical structure and intellectual ability. The female is not viewed as an equal human but treated as a

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mere object of beauty and as a sex object. Because of her lack of the male sexual organ, the female is assumed to lack male power and those male character traits which are instrumental in creating and sustaining world civilization. While the male is traditionally seen as the human norm, the female tends to be defined as an 'Other', or kind of 'non-man'. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1988: 16) criticizes the cultural identification of women as simply the negative object, or 'Other', to man who is regarded as the dominating 'Subject' and is presumed to represent humanity in general: 'Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him ... she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being ... He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other'.

In like manner, Kate Millett in *Sexual Politics* analyzes Western social arrangements and institutions as covert ways of manipulating power so as to establish and perpetuate the dominance of men and the subordination of women. In her book Millett attacks the male bias in Freud's psychoanalytic theory and also analyzes selected works by some male authors who aggrandize their aggressive phallic selves and degrade women as submissive sexual objects.

M.H. Abrams (1999: 89) elaborates further that, in the process of being socialized, women themselves are taught to internalize the reigning patriarchal ideology, particularly the conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male superiority. Women are, thus, conditioned to derogate their own sex and to cooperate in their own subordination.

Patriarchal Gender Roles

While one's sex is determined by anatomy, the prevailing concepts of gender — of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in identity and behaviour — are largely, if not entirely, social constructs. These social constructs are generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of civilization. De Beauvoir's belief that one is not born a woman but one becomes a woman is a famous dictum: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature' (de Beauvoir, 1988: 295).

By this cultural process, women have internalized the norms and values of patriarchy, which privilege men by promoting traditional gender roles (Tyson, 1999: 83). Traditional gender roles cast the masculine as rational, strong, active, decisive, adventurous, protective, creative and dominating. The feminine, by systematic opposition to such traits, has come to be identified as emotional, irrational, weak, passive, timid, conventional, nurturing, acquiescent, subservient, and submissive. These gender roles have successfully been used to exclude women from equal access to leadership and decision-making positions in the family as well as in politics, academia, and the corporate world. Also linked to the patriarchal concept of femininity are frailty, modesty, timidity and virginity. This patriarchal concept disempowers women and deprives them of the opportunities to express their talent and ability. Women are taught that it is not feminine to be extremely intelligent, to

have strong opinions, to assert one's right or to have sexual desires.

Such all-time favourite fairy tales as *Cinderella*, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* equate femininity with submission, encouraging women to tolerate familial abuse as well as other types of abuse and wait patiently to be rescued by a man, who takes the role of Prince Charming. Women are persuaded to view marriage as the only desirable reward for 'right' conduct. The plots imply that marriage to the right man is a guarantee of happiness and the proper reward for a 'good' girl who is gentle, submissive, virginal and angelic. As for those 'bad' girls who do not accept their patriarchal gender role and are violent, aggressive, monstrous, and worldly they undergo severe punishment. The main female characters are, therefore, stereotyped as either 'good girls' if they adhere to their patriarchal gender role or 'bad girls' if they violate patriarchal gender rules.

Defiance of the Patriarchal Literary Tradition

It was men who created literature, established the literary tradition and have passed on the tradition from generation to generation. Women were not allowed to share any part in creating literature because their domain was the house and the kitchen. Female roles were restricted to being only daughter, wife and mother and their duties were household chores. Writing was deemed solely the work of men. The few women who tried to be writers were either not seriously considered or ridiculed. As Virginia Woolf puts it in *A Room of One's Own* (1992: 78): 'Pope or Gay is said to have satirized

her (female writer) 'as a blue-stocking with an itch for scribbling''.

Both female characters and stories about women abound and have recurred in literary works over the centuries. Nevertheless, these images were created from pure imagination by male writers and do not give a truthful portrait of female life and experience. Images of women in literature by men are 'imaginary' and 'untrue' images and, thus, have proved to be different from or even contrary to the real image of women.

Moreover, patriarchal ideology pervades those writings which have been traditionally considered great literature and which, until recently, have been written mainly by men for men. Typically, the most highly regarded literary works focus on male protagonists, Oedipus, Ulysses, Hamlet, Tom Jones, Faust, Captain Ahab, Huck Finn, and Leopold Bloom, to name but a few. These male protagonists embody masculine traits and ways of feeling and pursue masculine interests in masculine fields of action (Abrams, 1999: 89-90). To these males, the female characters, when they play a role, are marginal and subordinate. The female characters are represented either as complementary to or in opposition to masculine desires and enterprises. Such works typically lack autonomous female role models and are implicitly addressed to male readers. The works, inevitably, either leave the woman reader as an alien outsider or else solicit her to identify against herself by taking up the position of the male subject and thus assume male values and ways of perceiving, feeling and acting.

Contemporary women authors feel the pervasive influence of the male literary

tradition which encourages and patronizes the production of male writings while simultaneously hindering the creation and blossoming of female works. It is evident that patriarchal ideology has not done justice to women and has pressurized women to discard their identity and subjectivity. These contemporary women writers remember the Genesis narrative in which Eve disobeys God. Heller and Moran (2003: 1) call Eve's disobedience in *Scenes of the Apple* 'a fable about the subjection of female 'oral pleasure' to the regulation of patriarchal law'. In her defiance, Eve displays her female self-assertion against patriarchal authority. The women writers emulate Eve and repeat the rebellion by discarding the patriarchal literary tradition and inventing a female literary tradition from the female body and soul, female life experience and female perspectives by, as Cixous calls it, '*writing the body*' in 'The Laugh of the Medusa.' In so doing, women authors demolish the patriarchal ideology that has traditionally devalued and silenced women for centuries.

Creation of a Female Literary Tradition

Contemporary women authors have shattered stereotypes and rejected traditional gender roles. Some writers have challenged literary conventions by deliberately opting to reduce the male role, reverse male authority, ridicule male characters or dismiss them as dead, absent or unnamed. The women authors do not focus on male protagonists and male characters are no longer the centre of their writings.

In *Like Water for Chocolate* Laura Esquivel reduces the male role; all the male characters are marginal, subordinate,

and are represented as complementary to the female protagonists. Esquivel even dismisses one male character as dead at the opening of the novel. Juan De la Garza, Mama Elena's husband, dies at the beginning of the story. Juan, who is Tita's father, has no role in the novel; Esquivel tells his story in only one paragraph. Juan is ignorant of Mama Elena's adultery and he is unaware that Gertrudis is not his eldest daughter but the daughter of Mama Elena and her mulatto lover. Once this secret is accidentally brought to his attention, he suffers a heart attack and dies on the spot.

Esquivel makes Pedro, Tita's lover and Rosaura's husband, a subordinate character. Pedro's role is represented as complementary to Tita and Mama Elena; his weakness and submissiveness are set against Mama Elena's domination and Tita's strength of mind in order to bring out the greatness of the two female characters. Pedro yields to Mama Elena's orders and authority. Although he loves Tita wholeheartedly, he marries Rosaura. He obeys Mama Elena and agrees to take Rosaura and Roberto, their first child, to live in another town. Pedro lacks courage, self-assertion and leadership. Pedro neither thinks of eloping with Tita nor disobeys Mama Elena. Ironically, it is Tita who is the stronger and braver: 'If Pedro had asked Tita to run away with him, she wouldn't have hesitated for a moment but he didn't' (LWC 56). As husband, Pedro has no control over Rosaura. Rosaura insists on upholding the family tradition in which the youngest daughter is not allowed to marry and must take care of her mother till the mother dies. Pedro cannot overrule Rosaura. As father, Pedro cannot protect Esperanza and help her out of this heartless tradition. It is, instead, Tita who

expresses fury and strongly opposes Rosaura.

John Brown is a gentle and considerate doctor with a heart of gold. He has been in love with Tita. He cures her from a nervous breakdown and takes her under his tender care. Tita is grateful for his kindness and his tender love for her and agrees to marry him. But when John discovers that it is Pedro whom Tita loves, he calls off the wedding and sets Tita free. John makes a sacrifice so that Tita can be with the love of her life. Esquivel makes John a male character who brings to light Tita's constancy in love and her strong determination.

In *Chocolat* Joanne Harris reduces the male role, ridicules male characters, and reverses male authority. Lansquenet-sous-Tannes is a patriarchal community in which Curé Francis Reynaud, who is the pillar of religion, assumes leadership. Reynaud projects himself as a pious, merciful and dedicated priest who is very determined to uphold religion and preserve traditional morality. But Harris uncovers his mask of kindness, disclosing his hypocrisy, fury, wickedness, weaknesses, and obstinate determination to win even by dishonest and violent means. Reynaud conceals the crime he committed in his youth when he burnt the boats of the gypsies who sought shelter in this tranquil town. Moreover, Reynaud is Muscat's accomplice; Reynaud hints to Muscat at the possibility of getting rid of Roux and his men by setting fire to their houseboats. Having made a great effort to create an image of saintiness, Reynaud is eventually forced to reveal his real self, a satanic figure.

Harris ridicules Reynaud and reverses male authority. Reynaud yields to the temptation against which he has been

vigorously preaching; he gorges himself on chocolates, one after another. He dwindles from a respectable and authoritative priest into a pathetic and ridiculous figure — a pig that indulges its passion and long-suppressed desires.

I have no time to read the labels: I cram chocolates into my mouth at random. The pig loses his cleverness in the face of so much delight, becomes a pig again ... I can hear myself making sounds as I eat — moaning, keening sounds of ecstasy and despair, as if the pig within has finally found a voice (*CHO* 312-313).

His actions bring disgrace on himself and laughter to the whole town. Reynaud becomes the object of ridicule; he has lost his respect and authority to Vianne, his female opponent and arch-enemy: 'And that was how they saw me ... crouching in the ruins of her window, face smeared with chocolate ... And the laughter. God! The laughter' (*CHO* 314).

Muscat is another male character who is downgraded from a dominating husband to a pathetic and helpless drunkard. Muscat starts off as a commanding figure who controls and abuses Josephine, his wife. He is rude and barbaric in his attitude and behaviour. He turns into a beast when he makes love to her. Being brutalized, Josephine leaves him and seeks refuge in Vianne's home. Muscat tries his hardest to force her to come back to him but all his attempts are in vain. Without Josephine Muscat falls to pieces and his Café de la République which used to be clean and tidy becomes a filthy and

slovenly place. Muscat looks and behaves like an insane man: 'Muscat has been uncommunicative ... he looks doughy and ill, hunched like a sullen penitent ... haggard ... quick temper ... drunk' (CHO 268).

In 'Babette's Feast' Isak Dinesen portrays a Protestant community in which the highly-revered and well-loved Dean is the leader. After his death his two daughters, Martine and Philippa, take over the leadership and assume the responsibility of caring for the old and the sick. Dinesen reduces the male role and simultaneously escalates the female role by turning this patriarchal community into a matriarchal society. The only two major male characters are Lorens Loewenhielm and Achille Papin; however, their roles are secondary to those of Babette, Martine, and Philippa. Dinesen allows these two males to come into the scene for a short period of time and then makes them leave the stage.

Enchanted by Martine, who is 'extraordinarily pretty, with the almost supernatural fairness of flowering fruit trees' (BF 22), Loewenhielm falls in love with this 'gentle, golden-haired angel' who is 'to guide and reward him' (BF 23). Through his pious aunt, Loewenhielm gets admission to the Dean's house and he repeats his visit time after time. Nevertheless, he finds himself speechless and unable to communicate his feelings. Loewenhielm leaves the town still carrying with him 'the dream-like picture of a maiden so fair that she made the air round her shine with purity and holiness' (BF 23); his enchanting love for Martine resides in him all through the 30 years until they meet again in their old age. Achille Papin, the great opera singer of Paris, is fascinated by Philippa, who is

gifted with an angelic voice and endowed with a heavenly and pure beauty. Nonetheless, Papin has to leave with great disappointment when Philippa discontinues her singing lessons with him.

The main role of these two male characters is to underscore the two sisters' heavenly goal. Martine forsakes her chances of earthly love and marriage while Philippa abandons her chances of romance and fame; neither allows 'themselves to be touched by the flames of this world' (BF 23) and their ultimate goal is to serve God in heaven. Another role of Papin is to bring Babette, an iron-willed woman, into the lives of the sisters and into this puritanical town.

In *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* Fannie Flagg makes all male characters, Ed, Frank, Smokey, Big George and Stump, subordinate and complementary to female characters. These male characters are set to highlight the distinctive roles of female characters. Ed Couch, Evelyn's husband, holds fast to patriarchal ideology; his simplistic view of life is that he is the man, breadwinner and ruler of his household. Ed takes no interest in his wife; he works, drinks beer, watches television, visits his mother at the nursing home and 'on Saturday ... would wander around the Home Improvement Center alone, for hours, looking for something, but he didn't know what' (FGT 42). Evelyn strongly resents her husband. She has been miserable with family life. Ed's role in the novel serves to intensify Evelyn's despair and depression.

Frank Bennett, Ruth's husband, is portrayed as a male who likes to fool around with women and enjoys abusing them. Frank greatly adores his mother until he accidentally finds his mother

having sex with his uncle. After this, he hates every woman. He ruins many women in his neighborhood; he has relationships with them, impregnates, brutalizes, and then abandons them. Frank marries Ruth because he has chosen her to be the woman to give him a son and to carry on his family name. After the marriage Frank habitually and repeatedly abuses Ruth. Idgie and her friends come to her rescue and use force to take Ruth back to the home of the Threadgoodes. Flagg portrays Frank as a villain who has wronged women and his own wife. Flagg penalizes him for his inhumane treatment by having Sipsey, a black cook, kill him while he is attempting to snatch Ruth's baby from her. Furthermore, Flagg contrasts the two relationships — the relationship between Frank and Ruth and that between Idgie and Ruth. Frank abuses Ruth and beats her up while Idgie gives Ruth tender love, care, and protection.

Smokey Phillips, Big George and Stump are male characters who help accentuate Idgie's generosity, wit, physical ability and her equal treatment of all people — rich or poor, white or black. Smokey is a tramp with his knife, fork, spoon and can opener in his hatband. He represents the many people who are homeless, unemployed and wandering. These less fortunate people are generously given food and shelter by Idgie and Ruth. Smokey is singled out from all the other hobos because 'you could trust him with your life' (*FGT* 349). Partly in response to her kind-heartedness Smokey brings the hobos to testify for Idgie in court and Idgie is acquitted on the charge of murder.

Big George is a sturdy big black man who is one of the bravest people according to Idgie. Big George is in charge of the café's famous barbecue. Big George and the

other blacks help emphasize Idgie's relentless conviction to treat all people equally. Stump, Ruth's son, helps accentuate Idgie's wit and resourcefulness. Idgie functions as an aunt, father and buddy to Stump. She introduces him to all the masculine activities and helps solve his problems in a practical and manly manner. She creates self-confidence in him. She teaches him, trains him and shows him how to be a complete man. She helps him to overcome his disability. Idgie's effective teaching and training is by means of demonstration not lecturing and preaching.

Apart from lessening the male role, contemporary women authors increase the female role and bring to light female strength and power. Their issues revolve around gender consciousness and the portrayal of women as the centre of gravity. The women authors focus on female characters; their story is both directly and indirectly about the struggles and triumphs or failures of these main female characters. They tend to create main female characters who are capable, individualistic and highly skilful. Through their individuality, skill and resourcefulness, these female characters gain strength and power and, thus, have influence over the people around them.

In *Like Water for Chocolate* Esquivel focuses on Tita, an unloved and ill-fated daughter. The novel deals with her whole life from birth to death. Esquivel delineates Tita's mixed experience of forbidden love, disappointment, sorrow, lust and sacrifice as well as her defiance of tradition. The novel ends with the final triumph of Tita over senseless tradition and the fulfilment of her true love. All the scenes and all the characters revolve around Tita's life and destiny. Tita suffers

greatly and struggles fiercely in pursuit of love and individuality. Though appearing weak and submissive, Tita has great strength of mind and a strong determination to assert her rights and freedom. Her culinary talent and creativity empower her and, eventually, enable her to exert influence over those who partake of her food.

In addition to Tita, Esquivel creates four compelling female characters, Mama Elena, Gertrudis, Nacha, and Rosaura. Esquivel portrays Mama Elena as the tyrannical, widowed matriarch of the De La Garza clan. Her desires and orders are regarded as the rules of the family which all must strictly follow. Gertrudis, the illegitimate daughter of Mama Elena and her mulatto lover, is depicted as a sensual woman who breaks social conventions, enjoys personal freedom, and pursues her unlimited sexual desires. Nacha, the ranch cook, is the prime carer for Tita during her childhood. Nacha provides Tita with the love and support that Mama Elena fails to give. She is also the source for most of the recipes in the novel. Nacha dies on the day of Rosaura's wedding but returns as a spiritual guide to Tita. Rosaura, the second daughter, marries Pedro, much to the despair of Tita. Rosaura attempts to carry on the heartless family tradition but she lacks the strength, courage and authority of Mama Elena. Rosaura fails in both the roles of wife and mother.

In *Chocolat*, Harris makes Vianne, a strong independent woman and proud atheist, the focal point of her novel. The novel deals with Vianne's wandering life, her being rejected, her unrelenting struggle for acceptance, her life-affirming attitude, and generosity as well as her decision to settle down and make Lansquenet-sous-Tannes her permanent

home. Through her compassion, culinary talent and unyielding determination, Vianne overcomes Reynaud, the hypocritical and wicked priest and wins the hearts of the townspeople.

Besides Vianne, Harris creates two arresting female characters, Armande and Josephine. Armande, an 80 year-old unconventional and combative woman who refuses to behave respectably, is Harris' splendid invention. Contemptuous of Reynaud and his followers, Armande is naturally allied to Vianne, Josephine and the gypsies. Armande possesses great strength of mind, stubborn determination and a strong sense of individuality. She is supportive of Vianne and instrumental in Vianne's triumph over her opponents. Josephine, a submissive and abused wife, thinks poorly of herself and develops weird behaviour. Harris makes Josephine turn over a new leaf. With the support of and encouragement from Vianne, Josephine becomes a confident, depressed; she feels unwanted, worthless, and entirely failing in her married and attractive, and capable woman who finds satisfaction in her newly-discovered self and in her own achievement.

In 'Babette's Feast' Dinesen creates three captivating female characters, Martine, Philippa and Babette. The short story revolves around the lives of these women — their faith, their goals and their choices. Martine and Philippa are depicted as enchanting maidens with ethereal beauty and angelic purity. God and heaven is the sisters' ultimate goal. Though pious and devoted to their religious belief, the two sisters 'upset the peace of heart of two gentlemen from the great world outside Berlevaag' (BF 23). Remaining true to her devotion, Martine forsakes her chances of earthly love and marriage. Philippa,

with her sweet angelic voice, likewise, forsakes her chances of romance and fame in favour of her firm heavenly resolution.

Of all the three female characters, Babette is probably the most remarkable. Most of the story centres around Babette — her flight for refuge, her struggle, her willingness to work hard, her preparation for an extravagant French dinner and her self-satisfaction in her artistic creation. Her culinary talent empowers her; her feast by erasing personal conflicts and prejudice inspires happiness and harmony and provides spiritual sustenance for all the austere Protestants. Her lavish dinner has turned into celestial nourishment which brings them closer to heaven.

In *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* Flagg invents two interesting modern female characters, Idgie and Evelyn. Both characters break traditional gender roles and enjoy independence and personal fulfilment. Flagg intersperses descriptions of the past which focus on Idgie and Ruth with the story of the developing friendship between Nanny and Evelyn, and these four female characters are the center of her novel.

Idgie with her short blonde hair is a tomboy who has male interests and skills and pursues masculine activities. Idgie's endearing qualities are her joy for life, sense of humour, boldness, sincerity, compassion, individuality, resourcefulness and her refusal to treat people differently. Like the rabbit of Uncle Remus' stories, Idgie tells tall tales, has a good heart and tries to make the world a better place for the less fortunate. Idgie is able to relate and communicate freely with everyone and she treats all as equal human beings.

Idgie is the most likely person to pull off the Railroad Bill stunt though she undoubtedly has help from the Dill Pickle Club. Railroad Bill presents Idgie as a modern-day Robin Hood. 'Railroad Bill ... a famous bandit ... would throw food and coal off the government supply trains' for the poor and 'the colored people' to pick up at daybreak (*FGT* 123). Moreover, Idgie stages a miracle by bringing 'Miss Fancy the Elephant', the superstar of the Avondale Park Circus, to Naughty Bird who is severely sick and pleads to see Miss Fancy. The performance of Miss Fancy at the home of Naughty Bird makes Naughty Bird happy, willing to eat, and, thus, recover from her illness.

Furthermore, Idgie plays a big part in helping raise Stump and cultivate manhood in him. While Ruth is more of a disciplinarian, Idgie plays the role of an indulgent father, and encouraging buddy to Stump. She helps him gain confidence and introduces him to masculine activities and tricks. Idgie together with Ruth moulds Stump into an athletic youth and decent family man. Idgie proves to be a multi-faceted character. Flagg makes her a forceful character with a distinctive personality. Idgie is probably one of the most unconventional female characters ever in literary history.

Idgie 'has a crush' (*FGT* 80) on Ruth the moment she sees her and her love for Ruth never dies even after Ruth's death. Ruth is depicted as a beautiful, sweet, gentle and amiable woman. She is 'so sweet and soft-spoken that people just fell in love with her' and 'the more you knew her, the prettier she got' (*FGT* 79). With her gentleness and attractiveness, Ruth can get Idgie to do anything to the pleasant surprise of the Threadgoodes. Ruth makes

Idgie and her family happy. Flagg's portrayal of the relationship between Idgie and Ruth is tactful; she renders their unusual love affair with exactitude and delicacy and with just the balance of clarity and reticence that would have made it acceptable in the time and place it occurred. Flagg's invention of the character of Idgie and her description of the relationship between Idgie and Ruth can be considered an innovative act of a woman writer.

Ninny or Virginia Cleo Threadgoode is another female character who plays a major role in the novel. Ninny, an 86 year-old, maintains an optimistic attitude toward life and proves a woman of great insight. She grew up in the town and married Cleo, Idgie's brother. Flagg makes Ninny an interesting storyteller. Her stories are 'threaded good' but seldom involve herself as she has spent most of her life as a spectator. In relating the stories of Whistle Stop Ninny functions as a link between the past and the present. The warm friendship between Ninny and Evelyn grows as Ninny unfolds the stories of Idgie and Ruth to Evelyn. Their common interests and concern for each other make them intimate and true friends. Ninny fulfils the roles of both friend and mother who teaches Evelyn what she needs to know to become a full adult and be happier with herself. Although Flagg opens the novel by representing Ninny as a lonely, talkative and annoying old woman, Ninny in the course of the novel, emerges and remains an affectionate, wise and good-hearted old lady of wisdom.

Flagg makes Evelyn a great developing female character who starts off as a miserable, overweight and depressed housewife whose life totally depends on her husband, children and the people

around her. Evelyn lacks self-confidence and self-esteem. Also going through a mid-life identity crisis, Evelyn is incapable of handling her despair and dissatisfaction. Flagg makes her awaken to a sense of feminism. Evelyn questions the importance of 'having balls' (FGT 275) and bluntly refuses to serve her husband. She escapes into a fantasy life wherein she is a super-heroine, 'Towanda, the Magnanimous, Righter of Wrongs and Queen without Compare' (FGT 241), who single-handedly rights wrongs and those wrongs mostly involve the mistreatment of women at the hands of men. In her imagination, Evelyn 'was machine-gunning the genitals of rapists and stomping abusive husbands to death in her specially designed wife-beater boots' (FGT 240).

Evelyn's salvation comes through her weekly visits and confiding in Ninny. Before she knows it Evelyn has found a friend in Ninny; bonding with another woman and hearing her life story act as Evelyn's therapy. Taking Ninny's encouragement and following her advice, Evelyn discovers her self-worth. Evelyn, now feeling empowered, starts to live for herself and strives for her own success. With her newly-discovered talent and skills, Evelyn becomes highly successful in her career, popular among her new friends and colleagues, and wealthy with her rapidly acquired and large income. Flagg has turned Evelyn into a capable, successful and happy woman with a strong sense of self-fulfilment. The loser has turned into an attractive and powerful winner. Evelyn is, thus, another formidable female character who challenges and subdues patriarchy. Many women writers not only decry the male depiction of women as marginal, docile, and subservient to men's interests

and emotional needs, they also disapprove of the recurrent and distorting images of women in literature written by men. Abrams suggests that these images are often represented as tending to fall into two antithetical patterns. On the one side are idealized projections of men's desires — the Madonna, the Muses of the arts, Dante's Beatrice, the pure and innocent virgin and the 'Angel in the House'. On the other side are demonic projections of men's sexual resentment and terror — Eve and Pandora as the sources of all evil, destructive sensual temptresses such as Deliah and Circe, the malign witch and the castrating mother (90). In other words, there are only two identities a woman can have. She can be either a 'good girl' or a 'bad girl'. 'Good girls' are those who are submissive, modest, virtuous, self-sacrificing, unassuming and virginal; 'bad girls' are, by contrast, independent, aggressive, monstrous, worldly and have sexual desires. Tyson (1999: 88) comments on these contrasting patterns of women imposed by patriarchy:

If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she's a 'good girl'; if she doesn't, she's a 'bad girl.' These two roles — also referred to as 'Madonna' and 'whore' or 'angel' and 'bitch' — view women only in terms of how they relate to the patriarchal order.

It is evident that both roles are projections of patriarchal male desires. Men have the desire to own 'valuable' women who are suited to be their wives and mothers, the desire to control women's sexuality so that men's sexuality cannot be threatened in

any circumstance, and the desire to dominate in the social and economic domains. According to a patriarchal ideology in full force throughout the 1950s, 'bad girls' always violate patriarchal sexual norms in some way. They are sexually forward in appearance or behaviour or they satisfy their sexual desires with multiple partners. The 'good girl' is taught to be uninterested in sexual activity except for the purpose of legitimate procreation because it is traditionally believed unnatural for women to have sexual desire. In fact, 'good' women are expected to find sex frightening and disgusting. 'Bad girls' are used and then discarded because they do not deserve to bear a man's name or his legitimate children. That role is appropriate only for a submissive 'good girl.' The 'good girl' is, thus, rewarded for her 'good' behaviour while the 'bad girl' is denounced and punished.

Many contemporary women authors reject these two opposing female images represented in novels written by men. Rather than penalizing 'bad girls' in their works, women writers reward 'bad girls' and in some cases allow them to prevail in the end. Eva Bates in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* and Gertrudis in *Like Water for Chocolate* are two prime examples of 'bad girls' who are portrayed and treated without male sexual bias. Eva Bates embodies sensuality and indifference to social conventions. She is depicted as 'a big, buxom girl with a shock of rust-colored hair and apple-green eyes' (FGT 94) and she 'had the extreme luxury in life of not caring about what people thought of her' (FGT 95). Eva has sexual experiences with countless men: 'she had slept with a lot of men since she was twelve and had enjoyed it every time' (FGT 94). Eva never has a feeling of guilt

or shame: 'she didn't know the meaning of the word shame and was indeed a friend of man' (FGT 94).

Even though Eva Bates is a prostitute who enjoys having sex with numerous men, Flagg neither condemns nor judges her. On the contrary, Flagg gives her a true lover; Flagg makes Buddy fall in love with Eva and he intends to marry her. Buddy is uninterested in her unconventional sexual behaviour. He takes Eva to his home and introduces her to his family. Although Eva has multiple sexual partners, she has only one love. Flagg portrays Eva as possessing an admirable quality — being true to the love of her life: 'she had slept with whomever she pleased, whenever she pleased; but ... when she loved ..., she was strictly a one-man woman. Eva belonged to Buddy' (FGT 95).

Eva is also a woman of sympathy and understanding. When Idgie is devastated because Ruth leaves the Threadgoode's home to marry Frank, Eva gives her consolation during this time of sadness and great disappointment. Eva 'couldn't stand anything [that] hurt that bad' (FGT 98). Down by the river at her Wagon Wheel Club and Camp, Eva comforts Idgie and keeps her company whenever she is needed: 'Hush up now ... it's gonna be all right ... Eva's here' (FGT 98).

Above all, Flagg makes Eva function as a practical instructor who gives sex education to Stump. Having lost one of his arms Stump has no confidence in his sexuality, 'Well, I'm kinda afraid I'll fall on her or lose my balance because of my arm' (FGT 266-267). In any case, Stump is ignorant of sexual activities: 'I just don't know how to do it right ... I might hurt her or something' (FGT 27). Idgie

helps him out by taking him to Eva who is probably the best teacher to give him sex lessons. Flagg apparently discards the patriarchal treatment of the 'bad girl.' Her favourable portrayal of the character of Eva Bates as a fun-loving, sympathetic, self-fulfilled woman and capable instructor demolishes the traditional expectation. Eva is not punished for her supposedly serious 'crime of passion'; instead, Flagg rewards Eva by making her emerge a worthy and competent person.

In *Like Water for Chocolate* Esquivel depicts Gertrudis as an extremely sensual woman who unashamedly satisfies her sexual desires without limit. Esquivel neither judges nor condemns her. The woman author leaves the judgement to the reader. Gertrudis is the illegitimate child of Mama Elena and her mulatto lover and this probably accounts for Gertrudis's voluptuous nature. Tita's innovative dish, quail in rose petal sauce, stimulates Gertrudis' sexual desires. 'On her the food seemed to act as an aphrodisiac; she began to feel an intense heat pulsing through her limbs' (LWC 51). She sweats and fantasizes about making love to a soldier. Esquivel describes her uncontrolled lustful desire: 'Naked as she was ... her pure virginal body contrasted with the passion, the lust, that leapt from her eyes, from her every pore' (LWC 55). The scent of the roses emanating from her body captivates Juan, a soldier in the revolutionary army, and leads him to her. 'Without slowing his gallop', Juan 'lifted her onto the horse in front of him, face to face, and carried her away' (LWC 55-56). They passionately make love on horseback. 'The movement of the horse combined with the movement of their bodies as they made love' (LWC 56) which produces a vivid erotic sensation.

After this lascivious scene Gertrudis wanders aimlessly from one place to another. She finally ends up working as a prostitute in a brothel. Gertrudis writes a letter to Tita unabashedly describing her insatiable sexual desire:

I ended up here (brothel) because I felt an intense fire inside; the man who picked me up in the field in effect saved my life ... He left because I had exhausted his strength, though he hadn't managed to quench the fire inside me. Now at last, after so many men have been with me, I feel a great relief (LWC 126).

Even though Gertrudis has insatiable sexual desire and works as a prostitute, Esquivel neither labels her a 'bad girl' nor punishes her. On the contrary, the woman author rewards her by making her successful both in life and in career. Gertrudis is reunited with Juan and they are happily married producing one son. Gertrudis is also promoted to be a general in the revolutionary army. In giving Gertrudis the rank of general, Esquivel allows her female character not only to intrude into the male domain but also to thrive in a career which is normally reserved for only men. Gertrudis would be branded a 'bad girl' and condemned in a patriarchal work but in Esquivel's work Gertrudis has made achievements and attained happiness and satisfaction in her life.

She (Gertrudis) has come back (home) with the intention of showing Mama Elena how she had

triumphed in life. She was a general in the revolutionary army ... moreover she was coming back happily married to Juan ... what more could a person ask! (LWC 178-179)

Apart from rewarding 'bad girls' and allowing them to prevail in the end, some women authors step over the boundary into the domain of art which was formerly and exclusively reserved for men. These women writers create female characters who take on the role of accomplished artists. To men such work as cooking, embroidery, weaving, and home decoration is never considered artistic work and the woman who pursues any type of work like this is not an artist. Men generally view such work as ordinary household chores which are the daily responsibility of women. The women authors disapprove of this presumption and call to attention that such work created by women is no less artistic than painting, sculpture, writing, music composition and so forth and that the creator must be regarded as an artist in the full sense of the word.

In 'Babette's Feast' Dinesen portrays Babette as an artist. Babette is a renowned cook in Paris and 'the greatest culinary genius of the age' (BF 50). Her culinary art can turn dinner 'into a kind of love affair — into a love affair of the noble and romantic category in which one no longer distinguishes between bodily and spiritual appetite or satiety!' (BF 50-51) Babette does not see herself as simply a cook but she considers herself an artist pronouncing 'I am a great artist' (BF 55). And her sumptuous meal is not for the sake of the villagers but for her own sake. The

extravagant feast is a creation of her supreme art. As an artist Babette will never be satisfied with second best work.

It is terrible and unbearable to an artist ... to be encouraged to do, to be applauded for doing, his second best ... Through all the world there goes one long cry from the heart of the artist: Give me leave to do my utmost! (BF 59)

Moreover, Dinesen makes her artist character gain power and respect. In her lavish self-donation, the artist cook emerges as the giver of grace through her art. Like all great artists, Babette soars amidst the wonders of transcendence. From 'a friendless fugitive, almost mad with grief and fear' (BF 22) Babette becomes 'a marble monument' (BF 59) and 'a conqueror' (BF 31). The female artist has triumphed and proved an influential and indispensable member of Berlevaag. In the end, the two sisters are moved to tears by the generosity and artistic talent they have witnessed in Babette. Philippa foresees Babette serving God in paradise. Babette's art is not only valued on this earth but will also be recognized in heaven.

'Yet this is not the end! I feel, Babette, that this is not the end. In Paradise you will be the great artist that God meant you to be! Ah!' she added, the tears streaming down her cheeks, 'Ah, how you will enchant the angels!' (BF 59)

Theme-wise, some women authors determinedly deal with such distinctively feminine concerns as food, cooking and nurturing— subject matter which is held in contempt by men as ordinary and trifling. Virginia Woolf makes the observation in 'Women and Fiction' (1958: 81) that the woman writer might well 'find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values (in literature) — to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important'. Analogously, Adrienne Rich in 'Transcendental Etude' (1978: 76-77) acknowledges that the materials available for symbolization and figuration from women's contexts will necessarily differ from those that men have traditionally utilized. Contemporary women authors insist on dealing with distinctively feminine issues. These writers attempt to draw attention to the universal significance of their topics and elevate them to literary subject matter which deserves serious consideration.

Susan Glaspell in her well-known 1917 short story, 'A Jury of Her Peers', has already shown that the male presumption of the innate 'insignificance of kitchen things' is foolishly and entirely wrong. Esquivel, Harris, and Dinesen, likewise, illustrate in their works the significance and aesthetic value of food and cooking. In *Like Water for Chocolate*, *Chocolat* and 'Babette's Feast' food functions as the title, the main theme, the dominant image and provides distinctive figures of speech. Food has a direct impact on the emotions and behaviour of those who consume the food prepared by female cooks. Their food provides physical nourishment as well as emotional and spiritual sustenance. Food is also used as a vehicle to communicate feelings and an outlet for female creativity and artistic expression.

Tita, in *Like Water for Chocolate*, develops such a profound relationship with food that she becomes one with the food and the food she cooks turns out to be an extension of herself. Tita's dishes can produce either positive or negative effects, physically as well as emotionally, on those who partake of them. Vianne's luscious chocolate in *Chocolat* pits the forces of liberation and renewal against those of repression and rigid tradition and awakens the hearts of the self-denying villagers to life's pleasures and ecstasy. Her life-affirming attitude, generosity and the delicacies she prepares enable her to have magical powers. Her chocolate shop in the drab town becomes a place where secrets can be whispered, grievances cured and wishes fulfilled. Babette's voluptuous banquet in 'Babette's Feast' transforms food into grace and weds religion with art. With its restorative power, her food erases conflicts and prejudice and inspires happiness and harmony in the strictly religious community. In all these three works food and cooking are an integral part.

To discuss how food and cooking are represented in women's writing is on one level to recognize the important role that this daily responsibility has played, and still does play, in women's lives. On a deeper level the multiple symbolic meanings that food acquires in female writing are explored and explained. Heller and Moran (2003: 3-4) insist that food and eating have been and remain central concerns in women's lives as well as in their literary texts. However there is a growing rift between those who perceive women's primary responsibility for food making as gender bound and oppressive and those who argue that food making can function as a crucial means of self-

definition. Arlene Voski Avakian (1997: 6) affirms the positive aspects of women's cooking.

If we delve into the relationship between women and food, we will discover the ways in which women have forged spaces within that oppression. Cooking becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power.

Anne Goldman (1992: 169) extends the scope of Avakian's affirmation, insisting that 'to write about food is to write about the self'. Deborah Lupton (1996: 1) adds that 'food and eating habits and preferences are not simply matters of 'fueling' ourselves ... Food and eating are central to our subjectivity, or sense of self'. The 'room of one's own', the kitchen, then, is no longer a place of confinement where women are denied the right to satisfy their desires, express their individual identity and achieve personal success. On the contrary, the kitchen can serve as the locale for male resistance, feminine self-expression, artistic creation, and female authority.

Laura Esquivel, Joanne Harris, Fanny Flagg and Isak Dinesen are contemporary women writers who have created women literary works from the female body, female heart and soul and female perspectives. Even though the four authors are of different nationalities and represent diversified cultures – Esquivel being Mexican, Harris being British, Flagg being American and Dinesen being Danish –

they have concertedly dealt with the same issues and show similar concerns. This is no sheer coincidence but a testimony to the fact that their common female interests and attitudes have motivated them consciously and intentionally to subvert the patriarchal literary tradition.

Like Water for Chocolate, *Chocolat*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, and 'Babette's Feast' are literary jewels which originated from female consciousness, the female desire to promulgate women's identity and a female deliberate female intention to counter patriarchal ideology concerning 'woman as the other', masculinity and femininity as well as false images and designated roles of women in literature composed by males. In these works, the female authors have created a female literary tradition through their depiction of 'real' images of women and 'truthful' portraits of female life and experience.

In these works the women authors portray a society in which men exercise political and social dominance. The communities in *Chocolat* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* are utterly patriarchal – male-centered, male-oriented, and male-controlled. In *Chocolat* Curé Francis Reynaud, the pillar of religion and upholder of long-preserved tradition, takes leadership and has pervasive influence over the townspeople who fear him, respect him and dare not disobey his law and order. Reynaud sees Vianne, the defiant female wanderer, as his main opponent and arch-enemy whom he must destroy and banish from his patriarchal territory.

Similarly, *Fried Green Tomatoes* depicts a decidedly patriarchal society both during the time of Idgie and that of Evelyn. Frank dominates and abuses every woman with whom he is involved. The all-male Ku

Klux Klan assumes control of the community, giving out orders, threatening people and persecuting the underdogs. The male police officers, with full authority, their power in their search for the murderer. Evelyn, as a representative of all women, has been taught and groomed by society to believe that to be a complete woman and live a happy life, she must marry, have children and perform wifely duties.

The community in 'Babette's Feast' starts off as a patriarchal society of which the Dean was the respectable and beloved leader. The Dean, who was believed to be a prophet, was the founder of a pious ecclesiastic sect. After his death, his authority was passed onto his two daughters, Martine and Philippa. Thus, the patriarchal society has been shifted into a society in which Martine and Philippa assume leadership. Nevertheless, this small Norwegian town cannot be considered a matriarchal society as the two sisters do not possess the authority that their father had. Martine and Philippa act rather as strict coordinators who discipline the villagers, see to the harmony of the Dean's disciples and help them perform their religious rites and activities as before. The two sisters' main responsibilities, above all, are to take care of the old and the sick. Martine and Philippa, thus, are not the rulers of Berlevaag per se; they function merely as inheritors of their father's ideal principles and as conscientious caretakers of the townspeople.

On the other hand, *Like Water for Chocolate* portrays a household in which the female rules and other females as well as males are obedient followers; Mama Elena governs the family and the entire De la Garza ranch. Mama Elena is the

tyrannical, widowed matriarch with a strong, unyielding and indomitable spirit, resolute in words and actions, and fierce in temperament. Her desires and orders are observed as the rules for the family which all – men, women and even soldiers – must strictly follow otherwise they will be severely punished. Matriarchal authority in this novel is modelled on patriarchal power both in ideology and in practice; the difference is only in its power which rests with the female, not the male, ruler. Although Esquivel depicts a household dominated by Mama Elena, the ideological fabrication is an imitation of patriarchal society which males rule and usurp power. The matriarchal authority in this novel is, therefore, no less than a faithful shadow of the long-established and prevalent patriarchal power.

In portraying patriarchal society and its mirror image, the four female authors aim to diminish the role and status of the powerful males, degrade them to the powerless and, in some cases, humiliate the ruler and debunk his vicious nature. These authors, in turn, empower the weak females and make them influential and successful. Furthermore, the female authors have pointed out ways and means for women to survive in patriarchal society and have figured out retaliatory methods to lessen or demolish unjust patriarchal power.

Conclusion

From the beginning until quite recently patriarchy has had a decisive influence on the making and reading of fiction. Patriarchy has hindered or prevented women from realizing their creative and productive potentiality. Writings by men, which inevitably embody male perceptions and interests and values, are often

addressed to male readers leaving women readers alien outsiders or forcing them to cover up or discard their identity and subjectivity. In these works women are effortlessly represented as stereotypes lacking verisimilitude and vitality. In retaliation for the male monopoly of fiction, these contemporary women authors have rejected patriarchal literary conventions and the created their own female tradition to express female identity and subjectivity which were formerly confined under male authority.

Contemporary readers have witnessed major changes in contemporary fiction in which female writers discard traditional female roles and 'untrue' images imposed on women. These women authors reduce the male role, ridicule male characters and reverse male authority. While lessening the male role, the women writers increase the female role, make female characters the focus of their work and reverse the traditional practice by portraying male characters as marginal, subordinate or complementary to female interests and desires. Also, rather than penalizing 'bad girls' in their works these authors reward 'bad girls' and in some cases allow them to prevail at the end. The women writers step over the boundary into the domain of art and create female characters who take the role of accomplished artists. Theme-wise these authors determinedly deal with such distinctive feminine concerns as food, cooking, and nurturing, drawing attention to their universal significance and elevating them to literary subjects which deserves serious consideration. By challenging patriarchal ideology, by violating conventional practices, by inventing compelling female characters and by representing female lived experience and a feminine perspective, these women authors have successfully

created a female literary tradition in contemporary fiction.

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List of Abbreviations

BF	'Babette's Feast'
CH	<i>Chocolat</i>
FGT	<i>Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe</i>
LWC	<i>Like Water for Chocolate</i>